

The Beheading Cycle
The Blue Savant and the Master of Nonsense
by
Nisioisin

Cast of Characters

Akagami Iria.....Owner of Wet Wing Raven Island
Handa Rei.....Head Maid of the Mansion
Chiga Akari.....Eldest of the Triplet Maids
Chiga Hikari.....Middle Child of the Triplet Maids
Chiga Teruko.....Youngest of the Triplet Maids

Ibuki Kanami.....Genius – Painter
Sashirono Yayoi.....Genius – Cook
Sonoyama Akane.....Genius – Seven Fools
Himena Maki.....Genius – Fortune Teller
Kunagisa Tomo.....Genius – Engineer

Sakaki Shinya.....Ibuki Kanami's Assistant
Me (Narrator).....Kunagisa Tomo's Attendant

Aikawa Jun.....Humanity's Strongest Consultant

"It is more dangerous to have one talent too many than one talent too few." --Nietzsche

Me (Narrator)

Kunagisa Tomo's Attendant

"There's something frightening about anyone who can consciously, intentionally trample others underfoot."

There was.

Although I was far more frightened of those who unconsciously, unintentionally trampled others, those who trampled others in the name of what was right and what was just.

I said as much, and was mocked for it.

"Oh? Ha. So you're a good guy, then?"

Fortunately, whether I was a good guy or not had little to do with the situation at hand. It was not a difference of opinion so much as a difference in worldview. The absolute, fundamental division between those who lived without the need to trample others, and those who didn't even rate a trampling. That's what it boiled down to in my eyes.

Like the artist with no style.

Like the academic with nothing else to achieve.

Like the cook who had mastered all flavors.

Like the fortune teller who had divined too much.

The women on the island were on the other side of that divide.

Those invited, and those who invited them – they were all extremes. Impossible extremes, hopeless extremes, unimaginable extremes. Reach out your hand and you could not hope to touch them. Too far gone to ever hope to follow. Every one of them.

So...

"This is a question of what a genius is, and what a genius isn't. It would be so much better to be without talent. To be unbelievably dense. So dense you never wonder why you are alive, never ponder the meaning of life, never consider the value of your continued existence. The world is paradise to the stupid. Happy, peaceful, contented. The smallest things are so vitally important, and things that are vitally important are of no consequence at all – a recipe for an ideal life."

I knew she spoke the truth.

The world was tough on the best of us. It was tough on the capable.

The world was tough on the pure. It was tough on the smart.

The world was easy on the worst of us. It was easy on the inept.

The world was easy on the corrupt. It was easy on the dimwitted.

But this was a problem without solution, without resolution. The moment you understood the problem, the moment you became aware that it existed, you were already finished. Finished before you began, like a story where the ending was a foregone conclusion.

For example.

"There are two fundamental ways to live. Live mindful of how little you matter, or live mindful of how little the world matters. Allow the world to rob you of your value, or destroy the world and make it yours."

You had to decide...

...to value yourself, or to value the world.

Was the world boring, or were you boring?

Which way of life was better?

Was there no gray area, no middle ground between these

two points of view?

Was there no clear basis to decide which was right?

Was the choice really a choice at all?

Was it even yours to make?

"Where does genius begin?"

What was real, what was a false?

Who was real, and who was fake?

A question that should not be asked.

A smile. A cynical laugh.

"So. Which are you?"

Well...

"How do you see the world?"

But I had seen what happened on the island. I had stood by the side of the blue savant. I had had the conversation I was having. So I knew better than to considering the answer. It was all just so much nonsense.

So I said nothing.

Instead, I looked away, and thought of other things.

Of how the world might look in the eyes of another. Of how she might see me.

Day 3 (1) – The Savant Gathering

Kunagisa Tomo

Genius – Engineer

**Don't be in such a hurry!
Sit down, take a load off.**

Morning of our third day on Wet Wing Raven Island was about to begin. As I opened my eyes, the dreams I'd been having and the reality I was about to face were still hard to tell apart.

The room was still fairly dark; the only source of light was a small rectangular window placed high on the wall. There was no light to switch on, so if I wanted more light, I would simply have to wait a while. The sun had barely emerged from below the horizon – it was around six. I could surmise as much from my internal clock and knowledge of the time of sunrise. The margin of error was plus or minus fifteen minutes, but it could have been an hour, and I would not have minded in the least.

"...time to get up," I muttered, and sat up.

It was a bare room – unfurnished save for a single chair. In fact, the only other thing in the room was my futon. The ceiling was high, which helped the room feel larger than it was, but the decor made it feel more like a dungeon, and I suddenly imagined myself a prisoner in it. The second time I'd woken here to such unpleasant free association.

While the room was not a dungeon, it had not originally been a room at all. It was more of a crawlspace, and was usually used for storage. I'd asked Akari to give me the smallest room in the mansion, and she had shown me here. It was still far larger than my own place, depressingly enough.

"No...not worth being depressed by."

Anyway.

I changed my thought channel from prisoner to normal.

In the interest of finding out the exact time, I glanced at my watch, but there was nothing on the screen. Apparently the

battery had died while I was asleep. No – I had changed the battery not that long ago, so there must be some other reason for this breakdown. In which case I should get Kunagisa to fix it for me.

I ran my fingers through my hair, did a few stretches, and left the room. I followed the expensive-looking – and undoubtedly expensive – red shag carpet. Eventually I reached a spiral staircase, where I found Rei and Akari.

"Good morning! You're both up early," I said, attempting to mimic human manners. Both of them bobbed their heads at me, and passed by without a word. ".....harsh."

I knew they were both working, and I was not technically a proper guest, so I supposed I should be satisfied they acknowledged me at all. If I wanted more of a reaction I'd have to throw my hands up in the air and shout, "Day-O!" or something, but I saw no point in exerting myself unduly.

Handa Rei, and Chiga Akari.

Both of them were maids working in this mansion. Rei was the head maid, and Akari was an ordinary maid working under her. There were two other ordinary maids working here, making for a grand total of four. Considering who lived here, and the nature of the place, four might seem like a small staff, but they were apparently specialists in the maid business, and took care of the place very efficiently.

The maids worked directly for the owner of the mansion – a woman named Akagami Ilia. She owned the mansion and the island it stood on, and had invited Kunagisa and myself to join her here.

"Er...not that she invited me."

But how old *was* Akari?

Rei looked to be in her late twenties, probably. For a kid like me it was hard to tell how old women that age really were,

but I was roughly in the ballpark. Akari was another story. She couldn't possibly be younger than me, but even so, she really did look young. You've seen the type before – grown ups who get half price tickets on public transportation. I wondered pointlessly if she went for younger guys (which was, of course, nonsense) and then went up the spiral staircase to the second floor.

I headed for Kunagisa's room.

When we arrived here two days ago, a room had, in the usual manner, been made ready for Kunagisa. But not for me. Unsurprisingly – I had not known I was coming to this weird island until that very day, when Kunagisa called me. Naturally, her hosts had not been expecting me either.

Akari had hastily prepared a room for me, and I had politely turned it down. Why? The answer will be obvious as soon as I open Kunagisa's door.

I knocked first, then did so.

Inside was enormous. White plush carpet, white walls, and white furniture. Even I knew that white reflected light. They had prepared this room precisely because they knew Kunagisa's favorite color was white. There was a massive sofa in the center of the room, with a wooden table in front of it. The bed had a canopy, like something from a movie about medieval royalty.

"...could never sleep here."

This was why I had had Akari show me to the storage space on the first floor. Kunagisa Tomo, however, was completely free of such trifling concerns, and was sprawled out on top of those gleaming white sheets.

I looked at the massive antique wind up clock on the wall (also white) and it was, as expected, just past six.

Wondering what to do next, I sat quietly down next to the bed, my hands sinking into the carpet.

Kunagisa rolled over.

Her eyes fluttered open.

"...mm? Mm? Ii-chan?" My arrival must have woken her. She pushed her Hawaiian Blue hair out of her eyes, staring blearily at me. "Oh...hmm...Ii-chan. Um. You came to wake me up? Thanks."

"No, I came to put you to bed. Not like you to sleep at night, Tomo. Did you just fall asleep?"

In which case I should not have come in.

Kunagisa shook her head.

"I got at least three hours. Yesterday...a lot happened, Ii-chan. Give me five seconds. ..., ..., Morning! What a beautiful day!"

Her tiny body sprang out of bed, a huge smile on her face, her hands open and thrust out in front of her.

"Hey, wait. It's still dark out! Darkish. So not beautiful yet. Nooo! I refuse to accept any morning where the sun is not already directly overhead!"

"That would be noon."

"Still, I got plenty of sleep," Kunagisa said, ignoring me. "I went to bed at three, I think. Something kinda nasty happened yesterday. So I threw myself on the bed. When you're in a bad mood, you might as well sleep. Sleep! The one salvation the gods gave mankind. Say, Ii-chan."

"What is it, Tomo?"

"Don't move."

Without giving me time to be flustered, Kunagisa threw her arms around me. You could even say she snuggled up against me. There was no space left between our bodies at all. Kunagisa's tiny head was resting on my right shoulder, her body pressed up against mine, and her thin arms wrapped around my neck.

Tightly.

She was awfully light.

"Um, Kunagisa?"

"Recharging," she said, in a robot voice. Well, in that case, I could hardly move away. I abandoned the idea, and let her be.

Was I alternating or direct current?

I realized Kunagisa had slept in her coat. Apparently she wore the thing indoors and out, all year round. It was a man's coat, black, and big enough that when placed on Kunagisa's tiny frame, the sleeves hovered just off the floor. Kunagisa loved it to pieces. I'd tried to convince her to at least take it off when she slept, but to no avail. It was not easy getting Kunagisa Tomo to do anything she didn't want to.

I was the same way.

"..., mm, thank you," Kunagisa said, releasing me. "Recharging complete. I can now face the day."

Kunagisa hopped down off the bed, her blue hair swaying as she made a beeline for the computers under the window. There were three of them, which Kunagisa had brought with her from her home in Shirosaki. All towers; the ones on either side were normal size, while the one in the middle was massive. All three were white. I could not work out what Kunagisa saw in a color that showed dirt so easily.

The computer towers were arranged in a U shape around her chair. Kunagisa could operate all three of them at once. She had only two arms, so why she felt the need to use three keyboards at once was beyond my comprehension.

I looked over her shoulder. The layout on the keyboards was bizarre, conforming to no layout I'd ever seen before. There was no point in asking about it. Kunagisa Tomo was an extremely talented engineer, and could make herself a keyboard before breakfast.

She never used a mouse. Claimed they just slowed her down. To my amateur eye, a computer without a mouse was a

freakish, unnatural thing. Not that I minded freakish, unnatural things.

"Ii-chan."

"What?"

"Put my hair up."

Okay. I stepped closer to her chair, pulled a band off my wrist, and made a braid on either side.

"Wash your hair soon. Getting sticky."

"I hate baths! My hair gets all wet!"

"Naturally. Look how dark the blue is getting."

"I can't see my own head. Heh heh. I keep this up my hair will be navy! Thank you, Ii-chan."

She hid a smile. An innocent, defenseless smile, the kind that unsettles anyone on the receiving end.

"Suit yourself," I said, giving up.

While we talked, Kunagisa's fingers never stopped. She typed like a machine, a steady, constant rhythm. Like the work was already complete in her mind, and all that remained was for her fingers to pound it out on autopilot. Numbers and letters filled the three monitors, scrolling upwards at astonishing speeds.

"What needs working on this early, Tomo?"

"Mm, just a little thing. You wouldn't understand."

"Hunh. You need all three PCs for it?"

Kunagisa frowned at me. "Ii-chan, the one in the middle's not a PC. It's a work station."

"What's a work station? Isn't that a kind of PC?"

"Hnya, not the same. Both are designed for individual use, so they are similar, but Ii-chan, work stations outrank PCs."

"Oh. So work stations are really good PCs?" I said, achieving what I thought was a pleasing level of stupidity.

Kunagisa groaned. "Ii-chan! A PC is a personal computer. A work station is something else entirely. They're both micro

computers, but otherwise completely different."

"What's a micro computer?"

Kunagisa looked up at me like I was a caveman. "Ii-chan...you really don't know *anything*," she said, pityingly. "Why did you *do* those five years in Houston?"

"Not what you did, Tomo."

"Hunh. Oh well."

It was like a switch flicking off. Her full attention was back on her work now. To my eyes, the text scrolling up the screens might as well have been a spell.

I was perfectly willing to get a lecture on the exact definition of a work station, but I wasn't curious enough to prod it out of her, and I didn't want to interfere with her work, whatever it was. I figured any further conversation with her would get too über-nerdy for me to understand, so I let it be. I massaged her shoulders, and then borrowed her bathroom. I washed my face and changed clothes.

"Going for a walk, Tomo."

She fluttered a hand but did not turn around. The other hand never stopped dancing along the keys.

I shook my head, and left Kunagisa's room.

2

If I said I knew a lot about the Akagami Foundation, I would be lying. They were not in the public eye to begin with, and they were based in Kanto. I'd born in Kobe, raised in Houston, and lived in Kyoto, which made it hard for our paths to cross.

Roughly speaking, the Akagami family was old, old money. They might have made the money doing business, or they might have simply earned it by right of birth – it wasn't particularly clear to me which, and I didn't see that it needed to be. All I needed to know was: they were rich.

They owned property not just in Japan but all over the world. Wet Wing Raven Island was just a small piece of their holdings.

And Akagami Ilia lived here in a large Western-style mansion built right in the middle of the island.

As her name would imply, she was the granddaughter of the current head of the Akagami Foundation. A direct line descendant, born and raised to be that fabled creature, the wealthy heiress. She was to have inherited great wealth and power, destined to be a gleaming pinnacle that so many lives depended on.

But all that was in the past. She had been struck from her grandfather's will.

Disinherited.

I had no idea what she'd done, but apparently she did something. Five years ago, when she was sixteen, Ilia was banished forever from her family home. The head of the family provided a modest stipend (which was undoubtedly a figure so impossibly large it would boggled the mind of an ordinary citizen like myself) and gave her a small island floating on the Sea of Japan.

Banished to an island. Like in days of yore.

Seemed a little outdated to my mind, but I saw no wisdom in arguing the point. Especially with a foundation that operated in circles so high above my station.

At any rate, Ilia had spent the last five years here with her four maids, never once leaving the island. Five years on a remote island with nothing to do, and no hope of change. I could see how that would be hell, and how it might be paradise. Either way, Ilia made sure she was neither bored nor lonely.

Kunagisa had been invited here to help keep Ilia from becoming bored. Not just Kunagisa, of course; Akane, Maki,

Mayoi, and Kanami were all on the island for no reason beyond Ilia's amusement.

22

"Well, maybe there are a few reasons beyond that."

At any rate.

Unable to leave the island herself, Ilia began inviting people of note to come and visit. 'People of note' may not be specific enough – Ilia only invited geniuses. If she could not leave, then she would have them come to her.

Famous or not, if you had an evident talent or skill then the call would come. Room and board were free – indeed, Ilia paid for all expenses. Many had found that a visit to the island could be very profitable.

To me, it seemed that what Ilia had in mind was very much like the salons of 17th century France. Artists of all kinds, great minds gathered together, a life of productivity. Not a notion the average mind would conceive of, but an admirable one nonetheless.

It was a small island with nothing but trees and the mansion, but it provided a respite from the pressures of the world, and she never lacked for guests.

So.

I went wandering aimlessly across the island, through the woods, until I bumped into Shinya near a cherry tree – quite far from the mansion.

"Oh...hey there, I suppose," he said, raising a hand in greeting. "You're up early, um...what was your name again? Sorry. I've got a terrible memory."

He was a good ten centimeters taller than me, and dressed in clothes far more expensive than I would ever own. He had gentle features, and a gentle way of speaking. While I was sure of

his height and his clothes, I had no way of telling if he was actually a gentle person. I lacked the ability to judge by appearances, and I was not foolish enough to believe I could tell something like that about a man I had met only a few days before.

"I never said my name," I explained. "I'm only Kunagisa Tomo's accessory. Not someone that needs a name."

"That *is* self-effacing of you. I can understand the feeling, given the company here. I'm no less an accessory than you."

Shinya was like me that way. As I'm sure I don't need to explain, I was not here because I was a genius. Kunagisa Tomo was the genius, and I was just her attendant. If Kunagisa had not called me up and said, "I'm going to this island, so you'd better come with me, Ii-chan," I would still be living in Kyoto, in my four tatami apartment, going to college.

Kunagisa Tomo was the one who belonged here.

I feel that needs to be made clear.

As for Shinya...Sakaki Shinya was here with the girl sitting under the cherry tree. She was staring at the petals, her eyes seemingly devoid of thought.

Platinum blonde hair, blue eyes. A pale dress like a French doll, and magnificent jewelry. I would have to sell a kidney to afford either her necklace or her bracelet. It was entirely possible the sum total of all my body parts would not come close to their value.

Ibuki Kanami.

She was definitely a genius.

She'd been born with bad legs, and still used a wheelchair. This was why Shinya assisted her. Apparently Kanami had been blind until a few years before. It was not Caucasian blood that left her eyes blue.

She was a painter.

I had never been one to pay attention to the arts, and even

I knew her name. She was famous for having no style at all. I had yet to see one of her paintings, but I wondered if she was staring at the cherry blossoms with the intent of painting them later.

"What's she doing?" I asked.

"As you can see. She is looking at the cherry blossoms. They will begin to scatter soon. She likes fragile things, things on the brink of death."

Most of the island was covered in evergreens. This one lone cherry tree stood in stark contrast to its surroundings. It was an old tree, but it seemed odd for there to be only one on the whole island – I imagined Ilia must have had it moved here.

"They say cherry trees grow where human bodies are buried."

"Oh, please."

Oof.

I'd just been making conversation, but he cut me down with a single blow! Not that he didn't have a point.

Shinya smiled, to show he was joking.

"Personally, I've always thought that legend fit the plum tree better. But then we'd have to call it a myth instead. Heh heh. So, young man. Getting used to the island? Three days now, right? How long were you planning on staying again?"

"A week. Four more days."

"Hunh. That is a shame," Shinya said, shaking his head.

"How so?"

"A week from now Ilia's favorite is coming here. But you'll be leaving before that. Such a shame."

"Okay," I said, nodding.

Her favorite?

That must mean a genius.

"A cook, a fortune teller, an academic, a painter, an engineer...what's next?"

"I haven't heard much myself, but apparently, Ilia's favorite can do anything. More a generalist than a specialist. Smart as a whip, knows everything, incredible physical prowess...according to Hikari."

Whew. Sounded incredible. Even if the rumors were exaggerated, the very fact that those rumors existed suggested this was no ordinary person. I'd be lying if I said it didn't pique my curiosity.

"Sounds like someone worth meeting, right? You might want to think about prolonging your stay. Ilia will welcome it, I'm sure."

"Tempting," I said, "But honestly, this place is stifling me. It's not a place for someone as ordinary as me."

Shinya burst out laughing.

"Oh, please! Please please please please please! Young man, are you harboring some misguided inferiority complex towards Kanami or Akane or someone?"

An inferiority complex. I didn't feel the need to put any labels on it, but what I felt was likely somewhat similar. Shinya slapped my back.

"You've got nothing to feel inferior about, brother. Kanami?" He glanced over at the woman under the tree. "Akane? Yayoi? Even your Kunagisa? Not one of them could beat the two of us in rock paper scissors. They couldn't win more than one in three! Maki's an exception there, obviously."

"You are *not* making me feel any better."

I was a bit surprised to hear him refer to his employer with a trace of scorn. Kanami and Shinya didn't seem to be at odds with each other, but it seemed they weren't particularly friendly, either.

"Talent doesn't matter. I think you're better off without it. Screw talent."

"Why is that?"

"If you get saddled with talent, then you've got to go and *work*. Ordinary people have it easy. They don't have to strive for anything. That's a good thing, if you ask me." Shinya gave me a cynical smile, and then shook his head. "Forgive the tangent. Anyway, if you can stay longer, I do recommend it. This jack-of-all-trades might well play us in rock paper scissors and win every time."

"Well, I'll at least mention it to Kunagisa."

It wasn't the sort of thing an accessory should decide.

Shinya nodded. "We're a lot alike, you and me," he said, and tried to look me in the eye.

This was very uncomfortable.

The kid of uncomfortable you get when you think someone's watching you in secret.

"Alike? Are we? How? In what way am I like you?"

"Don't sound so disgusted! How? I know we both think we're just a small cog on the underbelly of the world."

Apparently disinclined to explain further, Shinya looked away from me, his gaze coming to rest on Kanami. She was still looking up at the cherry blossoms, like some supernatural power had cut her off from the rest of the world.

She seemed unapproachable, even mystical.

"She's been painting here?"

"You could even say she came here so she could paint. Her art is all she has. She lives for her paintings." Shinya sighed.

On the surface, it sounded like an enviable way of life. A life spent doing only what you wanted to do. That was not a life I could ever hope to lead. I had not found something I wanted to do, or even something I should do.

When I looked up from my thoughts, there was a mischievous smile on Shinya's lips, as if he had just thought of a

prank to pull. Worrying. He clapped his hands as if a directive from God had just struck him.

"Since you've come all this way, why not model for her?" Before I even managed to process what he was saying, he turned to Kanami and called out, "Kanami! Boy here says he wants to model for you!"

"What? Wait, Shinya!" I sputtered. "I can't...how could you?"

"Nothing to be embarrassed about. Doesn't fit your character, anyway."

"That's beside the point..."

I was shatteringly uncomfortable with the idea. Especially with someone like Kanami. The prospect was terrifying. But Shinya brushed off my protests, looking to Kanami for a response.

Kanami shifted her wheelchair, her blue eyes looking me over, evaluating every inch of me.

"You want me to draw you?" she asked, sounding exasperated.

That was hard to answer. It seemed rude to turn down an offer from someone as talented as Kanami. I wasn't sure I had it in me. I was weak that way. Nineteen years spent letting the world push me into things. I didn't have the strength to change the plot on my own.

"By all means," I said.

She nodded, looking bored. "Very well. Come to the studio this afternoon," she said. Then turned her chair back to face the tree. While it was painfully obvious she didn't give a damn either way, it looked like I was going to get my portrait painted.

"Good, good," Shinya said, happily. "You're free this afternoon?"

I said I was, then left before he could do any more

damage.

Back in the mansion, I found Kunagisa still sitting in front of her three computers...or two PCs and a work station. She seemed to be concentrating on the work station, and the two PCs were powered down.

"What are doing, Tomo?"

No answer.

I snuck up behind her, grabbed her braids, and pulled. Kunagisa let out a strange squawk. She bent her head backwards, looking up at me.

"Ciao, Ii-chan. Back from your walk?"

"Yeah. Wait, is that a Mac?"

The work station display behind Kunagisa's upside-down head showed what was obviously a Mac operating system. I'd heard Mac software only worked on Macs.

"Mac OS. Some apps only run on Mac OS, so it's running on a virtual machine."

"A virtual machine?"

"I make the OS believe there's a Mac built into the interior of the work station. Tricking the software, basically. Got Windows on here, too. Any and all operating systems. It can do anything."

"Hunh." I didn't really get it. "I know this is a really basic question, but what exactly is the difference between Windows and Mac OS?"

Kunagisa thought about it for a while, then said, "Different people use them."

"Um, I suppose that's true...anyway, an OS is the main software a computer runs, right? Which means this computer has multiple personality disorder."

"What a strange metaphor."

"In which case...what is the real OS this P...work station

uses? The dominant personality, as it were."

"Geocide."

"Never heard of it. Is it like Unix?"

"It's pronounced yoo-niks, not ooo-nix, Ii-chan. For someone who studied abroad you really need to stop reading everything phonetically. It makes you look really dumb. Geocide is Unix-compatible, but it's an original OS created by a friend of mine."

"A friend?"

Kunagisa's...friend. One capable of creating their own operating system. That could only mean they were part of her Team. The infamous Team.

A few years ago – in the last century, now – before networking in Japan was as advanced as it is today, the Team appeared. If appeared is even the word for it. They never once showed themselves, not even a shadow, not even so much as a scent. They never even gave a name. People gave them names – called them a virtual club, cyberterrorists, a hacker unit, attempted to define them. But they never cared, never even reacted.

They were an unknown quantity, like nothing else before. How many of them were there? What were the members like? Nobody ever found out.

And what did they do?

Everything.

No other word for it. They did so many things it seemed there was nothing they hadn't done. The rampage just went on and on. I was out of Japan at the time, so never encountered their work directly, but their rampage was so overwhelming and so constant that nobody could tell what they were after. They did everything from hacking and simple cracks to providing business advice like fixers. It was rumored they were pulling the strings on

any number of major corporations.

Not all of their rampage was destructive. For better or for worse, their very existence led to huge advancements in networking technology. You could even say they forced it. On an individual level their actions caused nothing but harm, but collectively they achieved impressive breakthroughs.

Obviously, to those in charges they were nothing but criminals, a plague to be put down. Even ordinary hackers viewed them as a threat. In time, they were pursued from all directions. But they were never caught. Their goals were never understood. One year before, for no apparent reason, the Team vanished completely. As if they had burned themselves out.

"Mwah? What it is, Ii-chan? You suddenly got quiet."

"Nah, nothing."

Kunagisa gave me a big grin.

"Nothing at all," I said, softly.

Would anyone believe the leader of that infamous Team was this cheerful teenage girl? They'd think I was joking, dismiss it as nonsense. No one would believe it.

But it was true...and it was what led to Kunagisa's invitation here. The Team was proof of her genius. She had hardly been invited as a specialist in mechanical or information engineering.

"How can I not feel inferior, Shinya?"

"Mm? You say something?" Kunagisa glanced over her shoulder.

Just nonsense, I explained. "Geocide...that means killing the world, right?"

"Yep. I think it's probably the best OS in the world. Geocide rules! Full marks on RASIS."

"Sometimes I think you deliberately use jargon to make things hard for me. What's RASIS?"

"Reliability, Availability, Serviceability, Integrity, Security." When I looked blank, Kunagisa rolled her eyes. "In other words, it's very stable. It does require fairly high machine specs, but you'll never see it spit out errors. Aa-chan's a genius. Heh heh heh."

"Aa-chan? A nickname?"

"Oh? You're jealous? Mm. Mm-hmm." Kunagisa looked incredibly pleased with herself. "Don't fret, Ii-chan. You're the only one I really love."

"Great. Thanks a lot." I hung my head, and changed the subject. "So if the OS is so great, why not sell it? If it sold like Windows, you'd be set for life."

"Never happen. Law of diminishing returns. Windows has too big a head start. Could never catch it. Talent and skill mean little in business."

Diminishing returns. The economic principle that the more qualities you had the less benefit you could derive from them. I'd learned it a while back, and the details were fuzzy, but it essentially boiled down to: realistically speaking, once something gains an advantage, it is impossible to overtake it. Whether that advantage be financial or one of talent.

"And Aa-chan only cared about *making* Geocide. He's the kind of guy that is satisfied with self-satisfaction."

"Sounds like a happy way to live."

"Even if he wanted to, you could never sell this. For a basic piece of software, the hardware demands are pretty extreme. Like astronomical. Even with my storage space, it's a tight fit."

"Hunh. How many gigs is your hard drive? 100?"

"100 terabytes."

A different unit entirely.

"Tera...? The opposite of pico, so...a thousand gigs?"

"No, 1024 gigs."

How precise.

"I've never seen a hard drive that big."

"Well, it's technically not a hard drive. It's holographic memory. It doesn't record data in lines the way magnetic hard drives do, but in patterns throughout the material. It can handle a terabyte of data a second. The technology...won't be available to the public for a while yet. It's pretty much exclusive to the space program right now."

And she had access to that.

Her network was terrifying.

"And like the storage issue, the required motherboard specs are so extreme you have to make one yourself. Aa-chan doesn't consider things like that when he's working – just makes the best thing he can. No attempt to make it practical as well."

"You made the motherboard? People do that?"

"I do," Kunagisa said, proudly.

She was an engineer, after all. The one who provided the Team with a full arsenal of hardware and software. Objectively speaking, they were all disturbing. Not only people who would create an OS that was impossible to run, but the girl who made a motherboard that could run it.

"So Geocide is out of the question, but do you plan to sell the motherboards?"

"I also only care about making them. Would you feel differently, Ii-chan?"

"I'm not sure."

Whether you had talent or not, there were only two types of people. Those who investigate, and those who create. Doesn't matter which I am, but Kunagisa was definitely the latter.

"And I've got so much money I could burn it for fun. No point in making more."

"True enough."

Kunagisa was not exactly low of birth. She used money like it was going out of style. She rented out two entire floors of a luxury apartment building. She had no job, but shopped as if she would die before she turned twenty. I wasn't sure how many people had more money than Kunagisa, but I doubted there were many individuals who spent more.

It was beyond my means to guess at which had more power, the Akagami Foundation, or the Kunagisa family, but I knew both of them had so much money they could fritter away 9 to the 9th power to the 9th power and still get change.

Come to think of it, while Ilia had been outright disinherited, Kunagisa herself was in more or less the same position. It was hard to say they were much alike, but certainly, both of them were quite eccentric. Neither one of them could ever blend into a crowd.

So I suppose they were similar.

Which meant the island...

The point of Wet Wing Raven Island...

Kunagisa's fingers began strumming her keyboard again.

"I'm going down to breakfast. You want any?" I asked.

"Nope. No appetite. Almost time for a flare up. Ii-chan, you go eat. Eat enough for me."

"Okay," I said, and headed for the dining room.

3

Akane was in the dining room.

Therefore, I was nervous.

Akane sat alone at the round table, her legs crossed with a very un-Japanese elegance. She had finished her breakfast, and it was coffee time.

"Hey! Good morning!"

This cheery greeting – accompanied by a bright smile – was delivered by Akari, who was cleaning the room. No, wait, not

Akari. Akari had neither bright smiles nor cheery greetings for me. That was not the Akari I knew and loved. Which meant...

"Hey, Hikari."

Having logically deduced her identity, I took her smile and bow as a sign that I was right.

Chiga Akari and Chiga Hikari.

Sisters – twin sisters. More accurately, triplets – there was a third and youngest sister, Teruko, who never spoke. Teruko's eyes were not as strong, and she wore black framed glasses, so it was easy to identify her. But Akari and Hikari were identical, from their hair styles to their maid uniforms. They did not look alike – they were exactly the same.

But unlike Akari, Hikari was nice and friendly. I might not technically be a guest, but she treated me like all the others.

"Ready for breakfast? Just a moment," she said, and was in the kitchen a moment later. I caught myself observing that she was a tiny thing, and could turn on a dime.

With Hikari gone, that meant I was, inevitably, left alone with Akane.

I hesitated for $\sqrt{2}$ seconds, and then sat down near her. I considered saying hello, but she seemed to be thinking, and was muttering under her breath. She seemed to be oblivious to my presence. I listened closely, trying to work out what she was saying.

"P-9f...P-8d...Same P...P-8g...Nx8d...P-2f...S-3b...P-9e...B-4d...G-5i, retreating...N-2g..."

I had no idea.

I had just decided that once you became one of the Seven Fools, even your muttering was in a different language when I realized it was shogi notation. She was playing blindfolded shogi.

With herself.

Not a normal way to start the morning.

"P2c+, black abdicates," she said, and her eyes shot towards me. "Thought that was you. Morning."

"Good morning."

"Heh heh heh. Isn't shogi hard? Pieces move so much more than in chess. I was playing white just now. It was a close one, let me tell you."

"Was it?"

Wasn't she playing both black *and* white? Could she separate the halves of her mind like a dolphin? Hmm, Akane might actually be capable of that, come to think of it.

"Are you good at shogi? Or chess, I don't mind."

"I wouldn't say that."

"Really?"

"I'm not good at reading people's minds."

"Yeah? Yeah, you have that look to you," she nodded. "I saw you through the window a moment ago – morning stroll?"

"Yes, through the woods."

"Love the woods. Love 'em! The phytoncides the trees give off help kill bacteria."

The what?

In America – Houston, Texas, to be exact – there's a research facility known as the ER3 System. Great minds from all across America – no, the world – gather there, studying everything from economics to history, political science to chemistry or physics, advanced mathematics to biology, electronic science to mechanical engineering, even paranormal research. They were the cutting edge in all types of research and academics.

It was also called the United Pan-Discipline Laboratory.

Everyone there loved learning and research more than anything. It was a place for people who valued knowledge over sleep, food, and sex. Run on a non-profit basis, never selling their

knowledge or the results of their research; a closed-off, internally focused institution devoted to secrecy.

They had only four basic rules.

Have no pride.

Have no honor.

Have no attachment.

Never say never.

Never hesitate to help each other out, do anything and everything, do not waste time or attempt to destroy the world, but do not leave things half done even if the universe itself comes to an end.

Want to research something? Want to know something? Anything? Can't bear not knowing? If the goals and the means were the same, you belonged in the ER3 system. They drew from the faculty of the best colleges, from the best research labs, to brilliant amateurs. They did not discriminate. There were those in the press that implied they were a cult formed by those gone mad from too much study, and their members were odd enough to support such theories.

But because of this, they achieved incredible things. The clarification of Dorevino Nonlinear Optics, stunning advancements in volumetric hologram displays, and recently they had proved that Dermo-optical perception was not a trick, but an actual sensory skill. All of these were credited to the ER3 system; to the group rather than to any individuals – likewise, as a non-profit, they rejected all awards and fame. While they avoided the spotlight, their reputation in academic circles was hardly to be sneezed at; while they had been around for a relatively brief time, their network covered the world.

And at the top of the institute was a group known as the Seven Fools. They were considered to be the seven individuals closest to understanding the mysteries of the world, chosen by the

chosen, the geniuses other geniuses considered geniuses.

Sonoyama Akane was one of them.

She had beautiful black hair, and an intellectual bearing like she'd been delineated with a ruler. She was taller than most women, and stylishly slim. Her entire body radiated feminine chic. And she had no academic equal in Japan, man or woman.

The ER3 System itself was not well known in Japan. Partly because the system was so secretive, and partly because the inherently indiscriminate focus of the place meshed poorly with Japanese academic traditions. Akane was the first pure Japanese member of the Seven Fools, and she'd reached that position in her twenties. By all rights, she should have been a household name.

Yet I was one of the only Japanese who knew it. There was no particularly impressive reason why I differed from my countrymen in this regard; I was no better informed about affairs of the world than anyone else. I just had a little more experience with the ER3 System.

The ER3 System operates on a long term plan, putting a great deal of effort into youth programs, developing the next generation of minds. Part of this is the ER Program, which arranges for students from all over the world to study with them in Houston. For five years, starting in the eighth grade, I was part of this program, and we all knew about Sonoyama Akane and the other members of the Seven Fools, in much the same way as you know about the stars.

So when I got to this island and found Akane here, I was uncharacteristically surprised. I was not the kind of guy that surrendered unconditionally to power, talent, class, or position, but it did put me on edge. I was still not sure how to talk to her. What could you say to one of the Seven Fools?

When I said nothing, Akane changed the subject.

"So, the blue kid...Kunagisa, was it?"

"Uh, yes."

"She is amazing. Had her do some maintenance on my PC last night. It was incredible. We've got some good engineers at ER3, but...never seen anyone move like that. Machine-like accuracy. Like it was all just routine work and she could do it in her sleep. For a moment there, I wasn't sure she was actually human. I know that's a terrible thing to say. But I can definitely see why Ilia is such a fan."

"Oh? She didn't...cause any trouble, did she?"

Akane cackled. "You sound like her warden!"

Her warden?

I didn't think I was that over-protective.

"More like a guardian, I think."

"Gardein, wardein – both old French words, mean the same thing."

"Not as much in English."

"If you say so," Akane nodded. Her successes were primarily science and mathematics; clearly, her grasp of connotation was not up to her grasp of etymology. "Either way, she was no trouble at all."

I had not really been concerned.

"She's not exactly easy to have a conversation with, though. Like she doesn't really listen to you. My computer seems to have skipped a couple of evolutionary generations."

"She's getting better. Used to be almost impossible to interact with her. She would either say what she wanted, or she would say nothing at all. It wasn't easy."

"Personally speaking, I like the way she's blunt about her feelings."

"Hmm. Not sure I can agree with you there."

"And," Akane said, raising an eyebrow. "She happened to mention that you – yes, you – were part of the ER Program."

"Ow."

That blabbermouth. I told her not to say anything. In full knowledge that doing so was useless.

"You should have said! We have so much to talk about. I feel like we've wasted two days! Were you being coy? I'm not as important as all that, you know."

"No, not like that, just...hard to talk about. You see, I was in the program, but I...dropped out."

The program was supposed to last ten years. I left it last January, in the sixth year. Came back to Japan, was reunited with Kunagisa, and admitted to Rokumeikan University on the strength of a high school graduation certificate I'd received in my second year in the program.

"It's still pretty impressive. Even if you did take a sabbat, you still –"

"Sabbatical."

"A sabbatical, you still got in the program, and they have really high standards. You should be proud of it, I think."

Certainly, the selection tests for the ER Program were unusually tough. And the recruitment conditions stated, "This conveys no privileges. We make no guarantees towards your future. If you die, we will not claim your body. All you will receive is an environment to satisfy your thirst for knowledge." Despite this, the crème de la crème from the world over took the test. Perhaps the fact that I had passed it at all was something to be proud of.

But.

But I had not managed to complete the program.

"If you drop out, there's no point to any of it. In this world, results are everything."

"I think everything is a result. You aren't going around believing crap like, 'A genius is a genius is a genius is a genius,'"

are you?"

Was that a hint of sarcasm?

"Equate not a genius with a rose. Look at Japan – if you try hard enough, people here think that's worth being proud of. The effort itself is what matters, not the outcome. Trying is itself worthwhile. I think that argument has merit. The fact that you tried is itself a result. Indisputably. What gets me are the delusional people that claim they could do something if they tried, claim they just haven't tried. 'I could do it. I just haven't.' Jesus. Takes all kinds, I suppose."

"I didn't do it because I couldn't."

"Hm. Heh. Heh heh. You are a moderate one."

"You...probably mean modest."

"Yes, I did," she said, smiling with her lips alone. She pulled a pack of cigarettes out of her pocket, smoothly transferred one to her mouth, and lit it.

"Hmm? You smoke? I'm surprised."

"I take it you don't like girls who smoke?"

"Not limited to women. Cigarettes are bad for your health."

"Health is bad for cigarettes," she said, and let lose a long stream of smoke.

Just as I was being impressed by the wit of the Seven Fools, she added, sheepishly, "Gibberish, I know. Forget it I said it. Wouldn't want it reflecting poorly on me. I vote we change the subject. I lived in Japan until I finished high school."

"Did you?"

That seemed surprising, somehow. Logically, it didn't seem particularly unexpected, but even so...

"Which school?"

"Normal public one. Not particularly famous. I was on the girl's karate team. I had fun. Well, I didn't think it was fun at the

time. But looking back, I think it probably was. Memories, eh? Over a decade ago, now. Skirts were about this long then. My grades weren't that good, but I did well in math and English. Part of why I wanted to go to college overseas. My family were against it, but I told my parents: 'You have to let the young burn themselves. Youth is a time for selfish hardship.'

"Nobody has ever said either of those things."

"Well, I certainly did. They disinherited me, so I went to America on my own. Kind of a big deal for me at the time."

And she wound up one of the Seven Fools.

Talk about your Cinderella Stories.

"You just liked math that much?"

"Yeah, it was all right. In high school I just liked that there was only one right answer. No ambivalence. So I focused on it. Liked clearly defined things. But in college and the ER3 System I found out that wasn't true at all. Like shogi and chess. Once you get down to the final stages, it might be true, but the possibilities on the way are infinite. Felt like I'd been conned."

"You felt like you'd discovered your lover's darkest secret?"

"An appealing metaphor, but not particularly accurate," Akane chuckled. "You see, at the same time I was also really impressed. When I was in high school, I'd been sure derivatives and integrals and cubic equations would be of no use at all later in life, but here I was, unable to get by without them. I was using factorials on a daily basis. That fact kinda blew my mind."

"I can understand that," I said.

And I meant it.

Akane gave me a satisfied nod. "You were good at math yourself? Generally speaking, men are more likely to be good at it than women. Brains are made that way."

"Really?"

"Statistically speaking."

"Sounds like a statistic designed for sexists..."

Any arguments based on stats like that were inherently generalized. If you rolled a die a hundred times and got a six every time there was still no guarantee the next would be a six. When I said as much, Akane disagreed.

"A die that rolls six a hundred times running is a die that only rolls sixes. You're dealing with a statistical significance too large to be dismissed as coincidence or even a weight imbalance. Gender statistics work the same way. Ha ha ha. I get it, you're a feminist. Or are you just saying that because I'm here? Don't worry. I'm no feminist. I actually get ticked off when people start going on about the rights of women or female empowerment. [46] How could I not? Those people are insane. Sure, the world is male dominated. But we shouldn't be looking to get equality based on gender – we need equality based on ability. The differences between men and woman are so vast we could safely declare ourselves different species. In my opinion, each of us has a role to play. Yes, there's a big assumption that a role is different from what you want to do, and a smaller assumption that what you want to do is the more important of the two. Ah, I suppose there's another assumption in the middle that you can actually do what you want to do. None of us can do everything, and I tend to look for the simplest explanation why not."

"Environment is also a factor..."

"Environment? Were women ever forbidden from writing novels or carving statues? When I look at recent trends, I start feeling sorry for men. My own position is a part of it; my work has all been in a man's world. Anyone would be upset to have me barging into it."

"You're correcting an injustice. These are birthing pains," I said, not quite sure why I was the one arguing the female side of

this.

"Maybe," Akane said, nodding. "I don't know. But I definitely don't get why women get so mad at men. Nobody likes it when they're just playing their role, and someone goes off at them for it. Why wouldn't they get mad? And don't you try and get me mixed up in it. Leave me the hell out of it. You see, women are fundamentally tedious. Same as men. Hmm. Even in ER3, there's more men than women. Five of the Seven Fools are men."

"The law of diminishing returns."

"The what?" Akane said, looking blank. "Can you eat that?"

"It's the reason beta couldn't beat VHS."

"Oh, right. Economic imbalance. You mean, once men have the lead is something like this it takes a lot of work to correct it? Of course, if we weren't so busy being jealous of each other, no problem would exist. Nobody gets it. There really shouldn't be any difference between differentiation and discrimination."

"Coming from you, it's hard not to believe. I can only imagine how hard things have been for you."

"Nothing has ever been hard for me," Akane snapped. "I just tried."

She put extra emphasized on the last word.

At this point I remembered something I'd been wondering since I joined the ER Program, but had never found anyone I could actually ask.

"So who is the smartest person in the ER3 System?"

I might as well have been asking who the smartest person in the world was. Akane did not hesitate for a second.

"The second smartest is Fraulein Love."

"And number one?"

"Now, now, young man. Don't make me spell it out."

Ow.

When I said nothing, Akane smiled ruefully.

"I'm kidding. Okay, in all seriousness? The one I respect the most, the one I objectively believe to be the best of us...is Associate Professor Hewlett."

"The head of the Seven Fools."

The list of his accomplishments could rob the most eloquent of their ability to speak; his was the greatest talent of the last century, and quite probably of the century to come. He mastered all academic disciplines while his age was still in single digits – an unprecedented feat, to say the least. He had been granted legal immunity on a scale equal to that of the President, his mind a national treasure under the protection of the United States government.

If Akane was a god compared with me, then Associate Professor Hewlett was the fundamental nature of the universe itself.

"If he had been a woman," Akane said, staring into the distance. "He would have changed history. I shit you not."

Was that aspiration in her eyes?

"Sorry to keep you waiting," Hikari said, wheeling a cart into the room with astounding timing. My breakfast was on top. She quickly transferred it to the table in front of me, and placed a knife and a fork on either side of it. "Enjoy!" she said, smiling. Then she gave an elegant bow, and left the room. She must still have a lot of work to get done.

Nine supplí with lettuce. Fish soup and salad and a sandwich on ficelle bread. Served with coffee.

Akane looked it over, and commented, "Sashirono never fails to impress."

Sashirono Yayoi.

She was the cook in charge of the mansion's kitchen, but she was no servant. No, she was a genius – a guest of the island. She had been living here for a year, the longest stay of any of the current guests. More than a few guests had agreed to visit the island purely to eat her food.

She had started out as a specialist in French cuisine, but was now able to cook all kinds of food, Chinese, Italian, Ethiopian – she had mastered it all. Supposedly everyone in the world of food knew her name and reputation. I knew even less about food than I did about art and academics, so I'd never heard of Yayoi before coming here, but she cooked three meals a day and the occasional snack, so the sheer scale of her talent penetrated even my thick skull.

It was an unwritten rule that girls named Yayoi were either haughty, or short and spunky. Yayoi was neither. She was elegant, with short hair that made her look all the more composed. She was unfailingly polite, and not one to call herself a genius. Besides myself, she may well have been the only people on the island with common sense. If I were to rank my opinion of the people here, she would easily place second. First being Hikari. Which is nonsense, obviously.

I had been informed that Yayoi had the uncanny ability to make any food better than anyone else. A rumor that certainly had me curious, but I had yet to ask about it. She spent all her time in the kitchen (like a kitchen hermit) and I had barely spoken to her.

Akane was gazing hungrily at my suppli. When I failed to say anything, she began staring at me. The look in her eyes was that of a carnivore eying potential prey.

"You've heard the humans are fundamentally incapable of registering more than seven things at a time?"

"...yes."

Anything eight or more tended to register as 'a lot.' This

was part of why there were only Seven Fools, so everyone in the Program had heard this fact.

"So if you think about, it should be perfectly obvious that you would have no way of knowing if you had nine supplí or only eight. The difference is functionally negligible."

"Your point being?"

"Boy, are you dense. I have no idea how you and Kunagisa manage."

"Well, we don't really have that kind of relationship."

"Don't change the subject. It seems you wish to demonstrate how impressed you are by the fact that I'm one of the Seven Fools. Very well. As a token of your admiration, I will accept one of Sashirono's delicious supplí. Satisfied?"

I passed the plate over to her in silence.

She began eating them happily. In moments there were no supplí remaining. Apparently by 'one' she had meant 'one plate.'

Not like I was used to big breakfasts anyway. I had been ordered to eat enough for Kunagisa, but, well, it was her fault for trusting me.

Changing the channel (mentally) I ate the sandwich and my salad. They were, simply, delicious. With every meal this good, I could see why this island never lacked for genius guests. Even odds that was why Akane was here.

"Now, as to your attempt to change the subject," Akane said, wiping her lips with a napkin, "But when you say you and Kunagisa don't have 'that kind of relationship', I have to tell you I do not think anyone gets dragged to an island like this if they are 'just friends.' What with school and everything."

Certainly, my visit here meant that I was missing my entire first week of classes. I had even skipped the entrance ceremony. I had yet to go at all.

"I knew her before I joined the program. More than five

years ago, now."

"Hmm. And when you came back, she was a cyber-terrorist! Shocking."

Certainly.

There had been hints when she was thirteen, but even so...

Yet despite all that, when I came back from five years abroad, Kunagisa Tomo had changed so little that I was honestly shocked. She was just like she'd been in her tweens. Physically, at least; her personality had become a lot more...human.

My relationship with Kunagisa...

Was not something I could easily answer questions about.

She needed me. I knew that much. But it didn't need to be me. It was rather difficult to explain why that should be, and it would involve a number of private things about her, so I preferred to avoid it altogether.

Akane nodded.

"I haven't talked with her much...but she seems to have a number of...flaws. That would make it hard for her to lead a normal life. Maybe flaws isn't the word. She's not diminished by them in any way, after all. But the way she concentrates is not very balanced. I've met a few children with savant syndrome. She reminds me of them."

Savant – a French word meaning learned. I knew that Kunagisa had once been called a savant – knew that only too well.

"Certainly, she needs a friend like you, a protector. That explains why she has you with her. But what is it to you?"

I had no answer.

"Your relationship seems pretty codependent to me," Akane added.

"Co...dependent?"

"Never heard of it?" Akane asked, surprised. "It's a form

of addiction within human relationships. For example, take an alcoholic. He would need someone to protect him. Someone dedicated to looking after him. If that person becomes too dedicated, they would be considered codependent. They get drunk off of supporting the alcoholic. You often see mild cases in romantic relationships. I hardly need to point out that this is not a very desirable situation. You're essentially encouraging each other's failures. I don't mean to say that's what you two are doing, but you should probably be careful you don't end up like that."

"Hunh."

"There are few things more meaningless than maintaining a relationship that has failed. But despite all I just said, Kunagisa's talent is incredible. Even ER3 uses her programs – her Team's programs. Never imagined I'd run into her here."

"What brings you to this island?"

Members of the Seven Fools did not normally have that kind of time.

Akane was silent for a few seconds, and then said, "No reason."

Oddly curt, I thought.

"More importantly – you claim you're not great at shogi or chess, but you know the rules, right? Why not play a game with me? We can reminisce about ER3 while we play."

"Right..."

Shogi with one of the Seven Fools.

I admit it was tempting.

"But not blind. My bad memory is a certified fact," I explained. An unpleasant certification to have. "If there's a place for us to play, then by all means."

"I have a board in my room. First thing I bought when I got back to Japan. I have a little work to wrap up in the morning, so how about you come by after lunch?"

"Sure thing...oh, wait. I already made plans."

"Plans? With Kunagisa? No help for it, then."

"No, with Kanami."

Instantly.

Akane's expression shifted to one of intense loathing.

Crap. I'd forgotten. The moment I arrived on the island I'd been warned that Akane and Kanami had a destructively unpleasant relationship. But my certified bad memory had let that detail slip.

"Since we have no small connection between us, allow me to give you this warning. You should spend no time with anyone in such a foul occupation. It is the action of a fool who revels in the devaluation of their self."

"Akane, you really don't like Kanami, do you?"

"That's not it. I have no reason to form any strong opinions about her. But artists are the scum of the earth. All of them!" Akane slammed her fist into the table. "There is nothing I hate more than artists! Artists are the single most despicable type of mankind. Compared with them, thieves and rapists look like Christ himself. All they do is hold a brush and dab a little color and suddenly they think they're all *important*. This part's blue, this part's red, and people call that a job!? Ha! Anyone can do that!"

She'd completely lost her composure. I wondered if an artist had stolen her research results.

"Sorry," she said, catching my expression. "I said too much. I don't take it back, but it's never fun hearing someone gripe about others. I'd better clear my head."

Then she hastily drank my coffee, and fled the room. She seemed embarrassed that she'd allowed herself to rant like that. Yet she stood by her words. Interesting.

Left alone, I sighed.

I'd been nervous the whole time. I was never particularly

good at talking to people. Especially if that person was Sonoyama Akane, one of ER3's Seven Fools. How could I possibly relax?

I'd messed up there at the end, but up to then I'd managed something like a normal conversation. I decided to call it a success. I was here for four more days; I still stood a chance of playing shogi with her at some point. See if I could talk her into a handicap; no knights, bishops, gold or silver generals.

I sighed again, but apparently I had started to relax too soon. Just as I was about to head back to Kunagisa's room, Maki came in, yawning. She was dressed in outdoor clothing, like she was vacationing on the island, and her hair was in a ponytail.

Humming a cheery tune, she came over and sat down next to me.

"Morning!"

"Hey."

"Tut, tut. That's no way to greet someone this early. Not that I'm early! You were up at six? Dear god. I've got low blood pressure, see." She yawned again. "Could never manage that."

I nodded. There was no point in asking her how she knew what time I woke up.

Once again I tensed up, though not for the same reasons.

Himena Maki.

She wasn't here freeloading; she had earned her right to be here.

Maki was a fortune teller. Just as Kanami was a genius artist, and Akane was an academic genius, Maki was considered a fortune telling genius.

And I was not comfortable around her.

Our first encounter had not gone well.

"A fortune teller?" I'd said. "I've never met one before. What's my future like, then?"

I wasn't really interested. I just assumed it was good

manners to say that when meeting a fortune teller. Everyone enjoyed talking about their work. As Churchill put it, "I only wish to share what I know, but people keep asking me things I do not." I was merely trying to avoid being one of those people.

Excuses, I know.

When she heard that, Maki grinned. "Then tell me your date of birth, your blood type, and your favorite actor."

Date of birth and blood type made a certain amount of sense, but what could my favorite actor have to do with my fortune? I did my best to answer, but had forgotten my blood type, and barely ever watch movies, so I just made something up.

Maki listened with her eyes closed, then said, "Okay, here," and pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket. She handed it to me, and walked away.

Assuming my fortune was written on it, I looked at the paper. Written on it, in Times New Roman, was my birthday...and the blood type and favorite actor's name I'd just made up.

"That was a trick, right?" I asked Kunagisa. "Her pockets are full of bits of paper with random numbers on them, or something. Like a magician."

Kunagisa shook her head. "Impossible. With playing cards, something like that might be possible, there are just too many possibilities. And she couldn't have looked you up ahead of time. After all...Ii-chan, you just lied about your blood type and favorite actor, didn't you? There's no way for her to predict a lie."

She proceeded to fill me in on Himena Maki. Despite my ignorance, Maki was apparently a really famous fortune teller. She never did cheap cold reads or magazine horoscopes; no fortune telling as entertainment. She worked for governments and corporations, working on a scale more political and public than I had ever associated fortune tellers with.

Himena Maki was a fortune telling genius.

"Some people even say she's an oracle," Kunagisa said, grimly.

They said she was a psychic who knew the past, knew the future, knew people, the world, and everything.

"A psychic?"

"Yes, psychic," Kunagisa said. "As in extra-sensory perception."

"Uh...?"

"ESP and psychokinesis – the two main types of extraordinary abilities humans have reportedly manifested. Maki's abilities would be the former. Retrocognition; precognition, and telepathy. Retrocognition sees the past, precognition predicts the future, and telepathy reads minds."

"Wait, you've lost me. Slow down...Tomo, Maki's a fortune teller, isn't she?"

"That's her job. A job that makes use of her ability. That's all. Running fast isn't a job, is it? But being a track and field athlete is. Being good with your hands isn't a job. But engineer is. Being psychic is an ability, telling fortunes is an application of that ability, and fortune telling is a job."

"Oh," I said, nodding. "So Maki..."

"Read your mind," Kunagisa laughed. "She knew what you were going to ask her."

"A psychic," I murmured, eyeing Maki carefully. It certainly had been a convincing display, but...

Now she was sitting next to me, looking very sleepy, and it seemed much harder to believe. She seemed like an ordinary woman, one who was very bad at mornings.

"So I know you don't think I make a good fortune teller," she suddenly said. Ever since our first run-in, she'd been oddly antagonistic with me. "Would you prefer I carried a crystal ball, or wore a black hood? Used lots of ominous words when I predict

your inevitable downfall? Or used lots of vague phrases that only seem like they mean something? You put too much stock in appearances."

"I...try not to."

"Yeah, I know," she said, shaking her head. "You don't matter, anyway."

"I don't matter?"

"Yeah. You're the Japanese representative for not mattering."

I mattered less than anyone else in Japan?

That was just mean.

"But out of the goodness of my heart, I will give you one warning," Maki continued. "Your impression of me is fundamentally wrong. Not only that, but your impressions of everyone on this island are all wrong. Including Kunagisa. It's like you are deliberately twisting your values when dealing with other people. That can make it easier to go through life, but I wouldn't call it a very smart choice to make. Eventually, it will backfire. Be careful."

Then she yawned like a cat. Every time I'd run into her the last few days she made my ears burn. And nothing she said was wrong – it all hit far too close to home. As if she were using that telepathy of hers.

Honestly?

I thought she was creepy.

"Sorry to be creepy," she muttered, and then wandered into the kitchen to get breakfast.

4

Seizing my chance, I fled the dining room, and went back to Kunagisa's room. She was still pounding away on her work station. Not many people would visit someone else's home and stay in their room the whole time, but different people have

different priorities.

Kunagisa looked over her shoulder. "Oh, Ii-chan. You're back. Meet anyone?"

"Almost everyone. Haven't seen Teruko or Ilia yet today...or Yayoi, I suppose."

I'd eaten her food, so it was almost like I had.

"Ha ha. Almost a perfect score, then."

"In what?"

"The contest to meet everyone on Wet Wing Raven Island before the morning is out!"

What a horrible idea.

I ignored it.

There were twelve people on the island in all. Ibuki Kanami, the painter. Akane Sonoyama, of the Seven Fools. Sashirono Yayoi, the cook. Himena Maki, the fortune teller. Kunagisa Tomo, the engineer. And the two extras, Sakaki Shinya and myself. Then there were the permanent residents, the mansion's owner, Akagami Ilia, the head maid, Handa Rei, and the ultra-efficient triplet maids, Chiga Akari, Chiga Hikari, and Chiga Teruko. Twelve people.

In any normal house, that would have been quite a crowd, but this mansion was so unnecessarily large that it managed to seem rather empty.

The thought reminded me, so I said, "Oh yeah. Tomo, how long were you planning to stay here?"

"Four more days. One week exactly."

"Shinya was saying..."

I told her what Shinya had said this morning, just as he had said it. That Ilia's favorite was coming to the island, and that this particular genius could, supposedly, do anything. Kunagisa did not seem terribly interested. She barely seemed to be listening.

Finally, she shrugged. "Meh. Information is too vague to really decide, but I don't really see the point in sticking around. I didn't come here to meet geniuses or anything. Don't really care."

"Thought you'd say that. Actually, I've been wondering...why did you come here? If you're not here for the salon, then what made you accept the invitation?"

Kunagisa Tomo hated going outside more than anything. I couldn't fathom a reason sufficient to make her come all this way.

She thought about it for a minute, then said, "Seemed like the thing to do." Not very helpful. "I don't need a reason for something like this. Ii-chan, do you need a reason for everything you do?"

I hung my head.

Of course not.

"As long as I'm online, doesn't matter where I am. Of course, home is where the heart is," she said, on an island far from home.

Okay. So like most things in her life, a whim. Not something I should care about, and not something I should keep thinking about. I laid down on the white carpet, and stared up at the chandelier. Jesus. This place was unreal. Not that I could tell you what kind of room I would consider to be 'real.'

Kunagisa squinted down at me. "Ii-chan...are you bored?"

"Life is boring."

"Pfft. Lame."

Ow.

So quick to judge!

"If you're bored, try reading something. I brought plenty of books."

"Books? Like what?"

"An English-Japanese dictionary, a copy of the Six Codes, and the most recent Imidas."

"Those all have digital versions!"

And who read those for fun?

Oh, right. She did.

Shaking my head, I rolled over.

"Mm? Ii-chan, your watch is broken."

"Hunh?" I said, looking down at it. Oh yeah. I'd meant to get her to fix it for me. Then I ran into so many people I forgot all about it.

"Give it here. I'll fix it."

"Might just be a dead battery."

"Hmm. Mm." She held it up to the light. "No, definitely not. Did you bang it on something? Shouldn't take too long. Surprised you still wear a wrist watch. They're almost an anachronism. Everyone else just uses their cell phone. Wait...Ii-chan, why aren't you using yours?"

"Left it at home."

"Sort of defeats the purpose."

"What if I lost it?"

"But...but..." she spluttered.

"And I figured the island would be out of range anyway. Maybe not for your phone, but for normal ones?"

The phone Kunagisa carried tapped into the satellite network to ensure reception anywhere in the world, even if she washed up on a desert island. It was almost never out of range. She paid a lot for that – kind of a waste, since she never left her apartment – but there was no point in suggesting she try saving money.

"Good point," she said. "And I never said anachronisms were bad."

She grinned impishly at me, and put my watch down next to her.

There was a knock at the door. When Kunagisa failed to

respond, I answered for her, and opened the door. It was Hikari, here to clean.

"It won't take long," she promised.

"Thank you," I said, letting her in.

"Ooh, Hikari! Ciao!" Kunagisa said, beaming at her. Hikari smiled back. Apparently the two of them were fast friends already. It was rare for Kunagisa to open up to anyone this fast, so it caught me off guard.

"What are you working on, Tomo?" Hikari asked.

"Making a game. Programming an application that automatically converts plain text into music. Thought I'd give it to Ilia as thanks for inviting me."

"That's a strange kind of game," I said.

"Erm, I can explain...um. Ii-chan, what's the longest book you've read?"

"Uh...I didn't finish A Tale of Genji or Don Quixote, so...War and Peace? That was very long."

"Okay. For example, we put the whole text of that in a file. Scan it or type it out yourself, whatever. Then you convert it, like i becomes do, r becomes re, h becomes mi, like running it through a DAC. The result is a piece of music based on War and Peace. At that length, it would be about an hour long. The process is a little more complicated than that in actual practice; you need to add chords and orchestration, and then program an underlying logic into it so it all sounds good. But in the end, you get a musicalized novel. Doesn't that sound like fun?"

"I dunno about fun, but it certainly sounds interesting. What language are you using? VB? C?"

"Machine language."

The lowest-level language there was.

People still used that?

"It's like you and the machine are best friends."

"Tee hee hee," Kunagisa said, looking ready to purr.

Hikari appeared to know even less about computers than I did. All she said was, "That's amazing!" with a vague smile; had she followed any of that?

"So tell me, Tomo – what's fun about this game?" I asked. "I'm still not seeing it."

"It's fun to make," she said.

I couldn't argue with that.

Hikari laughed, then seemed to remember something, and turned to me. "Do you mind if I clean your...room later? I stopped by earlier, but you were out."

"Go ahead," I said. Not sure what there was to clean there, really.

Hikari bowed her head, and began cleaning. When she was done, she sighed, and sat down.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm a little worn out."

"You should take a breather."

"No, I'm fine. Rei would be mad...she's awfully strict, like I said. But I'm fine. I'm always fine. It's my best feature. So I'm fine now too. Sorry I made you worry. Excuse me."

And with that, Hikari left the room.

I sighed. "Sounds like her job isn't easy. Was it my imagination, or is she shouldering a much heavier burden than she'll admit to?"

"She remind you of yourself?"

"Not quite, but I do sympathize."

It didn't seem like she'd led a very happy life.

Rei and Akari were both very good at establishing a division between life and work, but Hikari didn't seem as good at processing that internally. It was harder for her to deal with the stress life and work threw at her. There was probably more going on there than met the eye.

As for the third maid, Teruko...it was impossible to tell what she was thinking, so I couldn't begin to say.

"Everyone has problems, Ii-chan," Kunagisa said, trying to sound wise. "All humans suffer, and all humans try not to. Hikari is the same. So is Nao – you just respect him too much to see it. Same goes for Akane. The only person who never suffers and never has to struggle is me."

5

After lunch, as promised, I went to Kanami's studio. Kunagisa still had no appetite, and went to bed again around noon. The young engineer was chronically short on sleep.

"Wake me up for dinner. Have to see Ilia then," she said.

So.

I knocked on the studio door, waited for a response, and went in. There was no carpet here; beautiful hardwood floors. It reminded me of the art room in my elementary school, but it lacked battle-scarred desks and cheap looking statues. And this room wasn't as large. At a rough estimate, I'd guess the studio was only half the size of the room Kunagisa had been given.

"There you are. Go ahead and sit down," Kanami said. She seemed a little indifferent.

Shinya must be in his own room, so she'd been alone in the studio. I walked past shelves full of paints and other art supplies and sat down on the chair she pointed to.

It faced her.

"Like this, Kanami?"

She was really pretty, I thought.

Blonde hair, blue eyes, like a beautiful heiress in an old movie. But her eyes shone with a keen intellect, and with her talent for painting, she was proof that God was simply not fair.

Although perhaps that wasn't fair to say.

Her legs were weak, and she'd been blind until a few years

ago. It was beyond arrogant of me to be jealous of the gifts she had. Not that Kanami herself seemed to consider her handicap as something that held her back.

"God is fair. If my body were fully functioning, that would not be fair to the healthy." "Legs are merely decorative." "Seeing has not changed my world. The world is exactly as I believed it to be. Natural selection and destiny have no taste at all." – Ibuki Kanami, comments from a collection of her works.

She was seated on the same round wooden chair as I was. It didn't look like the most comfortable chair to sit on in a dress.

"You paint in those clothes?" I asked.

"This is my style. You don't approve?"

Her eyes were like daggers. Clearly, she had not taken my off-handed comment well. I quickly backtracked.

"No, I just meant...don't they get dirty?"

"I never change to paint. And painting has never once left a spot on my clothes. Do not take me for a fool."

"Um, okay."

Like an expert calligrapher, I supposed. Perhaps no experienced artist ever spattered paint on their clothes. Kanami was one of the best in the world, so perhaps I'd been preaching to the Buddha.

I hung my head.

"Are you sure you don't mind drawing me?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I couldn't win. Was she in a bad mood, or was she always like this?

"I'm not sure I make a worthwhile subject."

I mean, Kunagisa Tomo's skills were ahead of the crowd in any field she might try her hand at. But since she used them exclusively for her own amusement, there were very few people convinced of her genius.

"Prestige is entirely based on results. Can't and won't are the same thing," she had explained.

I imagined it worked the same with art. If an artist did not pick her subjects well, and just drew whatever she came across, then people would no longer value her works.

But Kanami dismissed the idea.

"I just told you not to take me for a fool. Do you even have a brain? I do not choose my subjects. You know, if you are that stupid, you can always try not speaking. I recommend it."

She shook her head. I deflated.

"That's just the kind of thing I despise. Makes me want to vomit. Oh, I can't draw because I have no good subject. The model was bad, the landscape was bad, I should never have wasted my time on *that*. Artists aren't the only ones, either. I'm sure you know a few snotty little egomaniacs who are always complaining that this isn't what they want to do, or they haven't found their true calling yet."

"I'd have to say yes."

Me.

Kanami sighed dramatically.

"People that hide their inability by talking about what they want and don't want to do disgust me. I don't know how they have the nerve to go on living. I don't mean I want them dead, but they ought to live a little more apologetically, you know? Shut their damn mouths and do something. Like take the most ordinary man or the most loathsome insect and turn them into art."

Despite her angelic appearance, she seemed to have a lot of pride. She never compromised, and she never let anyone else compromise. Anything else was beneath her.

I wasn't happy to be listed next to a loathsome insect, but if she could paint that, I was sure she could paint me. Further concern on my part would simply be rude. Any concern directed

at Kanami was clearly doomed to end in tears, so I said nothing more.

There was a canvas placed behind her. A pencil sketch of a cherry tree, looking up into the branches. The tree she'd been staring at when I was talking to Shinya.

It was a very detailed sketch, almost like a black and white photograph. The resolution must be extremely high...but at this level of detail, perhaps the metaphor was unnecessary.

"When did you draw that?" I asked, pointing.

"This morning. Got a problem with that?"

I'd seen her looking at the tree early that morning. About five hours ago. Had she really drawn something that detailed in only a few hours? I would have assumed it would take a week at least. This must have shown on my face, because she gave me a malicious grin.

"Only idiots take three or four months to do something they can finish in a week. Idiots, or the lazy. I am neither, so if something can take me three hours I take not one second longer."

Oof.

That one hit me hard. I was like laziness given flesh. Spasms of pain shot through me. Words Kunagisa could also stand to hear.

"Surely you must agree with me there?" she said, driving her point home.

She was definitely being as rude to me as she could. I was sure of it.

"Um, no, well, yes. But it is very good."

"Pfft," she said, clearly not needing my dull compliment. It was hardly refined criticism, and I could not blame her for dismissing it. Any five year old could say the same. I was an idiot.

"I didn't know you draw such detailed sketches."

"I can draw anything. Didn't you know?"

Oh, right. I'd said the wrong thing again. The artist before me refused to define her style. Ibuki Kanami drew everything from detailed sketches to oil paintings – she would and could draw anything.

She narrowed one eye at me. "There is nothing more idiotic than limiting yourself to one style. I'm not saying you shouldn't have standards, but having standards that are too high is a terrible mistake. Beyond that; it is madness. Whatever else happens, I will draw any way I please."

"Maybe you're right," I said, neither agreeing nor arguing.

Kanami snorted, but whether she saw through my sad little strategy I could not tell.

"You've seen my paintings?"

"In books. I'm afraid I've never seen them directly."

"Hunh. So what did you think? Not the books – when you saw the cherry tree sketch."

I was a little surprised she even asked. I'd assumed being a genius meant you cared not a whit for what anyone else thought. Sonoyama Akane, the other Seven Fools, the ER3 staff, the awful pricks I was in the program with – not one of them suffered from vanity, craved attention, or gave a crap what anyone thought of them.

Everyone one of them said things like, "I know just how great I am. What do I care what the idiots think?" Can you blame me for hating them?

"Um," I said, not sure how to respond. "Well, I thought it was pretty."

"Hunh. 'Pretty.'" Kanami looked annoyed. "I'm not after flattery, you know. I'm not mad at you or anything."

"Right, but...I don't have the eye of a critic. I'm no judge of art. I just thought it was pretty."

"Hmm...pretty..." Kanami gave the canvas a look of deep disappointment. She began muttering under her breath. "Pretty. Pretty pretty pretty. That's not a word any artist wants to hear."

72

"Oh?"

"Guess it doesn't come across. Shame. Oh, what's the use? Such a waste."

She let out a long sigh, then reached over, grabbed the canvas...

...and flung it to the floor.

There was a crack of shattering wood.

Obviously, the floor remained unharmed.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"Destroying a failed work, obviously. Oh, what's the point?"

That's what I wanted to know.

She gazed down at the ruined canvas dejectedly, shaking her head.

"Could have been worth twenty million, too."

"Twenty million yen?"

"Dollars."

Erp.

"In a few decades, obviously."

"Are all artists this crazy?"

Why had she done this in front of me? To make me think my half-assed comment had caused it? That didn't sit well.

"You shouldn't feel guilty. The fault is mine. I am not one to put the blame for my own failures on others."

"But I don't know what I'm talking about! What does my opinion matter?"

"If you have to choose your judges, it is not worth calling art," Kanami snapped.

Oh, was that it?

Suddenly it made sense to me.

Her words and manner might be snarky, but she had the heart of an artist.

"But it was so real, like a photograph..."

"Also not a compliment. Look, if you make a habit of using similes when praising things, you really should stop. There is nothing more insulting. If your brain is incapable of understanding the idea of not locking yourself down to one style, fine." Kanami sighed again, and looked at me. "I suppose I understand why you thought of photographs. Photographs started out as paintings, after all."

"They did?"

"Of course. Didn't you know?" She raised an eyebrow.

Apparently she asked that a lot.

"The man who invented the daguerreotype was an artist. Studying perspective led to the discovery of the principles behind the camera. According to Shinya, anyway. You've heard of the camera obscura?"

Even I knew that much.

It literally meant 'dark room.' You opened a small hole in one wall of a totally dark room, and an image of the outside would appear upside down on the opposite wall. A very old trick; artists had been tracing these images for thousands of years. The same principles led to photography.

"The technique was originally thought up to help represent the outside world more perfectly. The goal of perspective drawings is the 'representation of visible forms.' Not to go quoting Courbet. He's the guy who said, "Show me an angel and I will paint one." Founder of the realism movement. Total opposite of my philosophy. But if you make a kid draw something, there's no depth at all, right? Everything's right up front. No attempt at

relative size, humans the same size as the house. Or they'll draw the most important thing larger. They don't try to represent what they see – they try to express what they feel. Since drawing is a means of expressing oneself, a child's method is correct. That's why saying a painting is like a photograph is a little insulting."

"Hunh."

There was enough jargon in there that she'd sort of lost me. I also couldn't help noticing that she was talking a lot, but not getting ready to draw. Was she ever going to get down to work?

"Frankly, photographs don't even represent reality all that accurately. Correct them well, and it's easy to trick people. They're as subjective as paintings, when you get down to it."

"Um, Kanami...aren't you going to draw?"

"I'm busy memorizing you," she said. At first I thought she was insulting me again, but she sounded unusually placid. "Didn't you know? I only work alone. Can't concentrate when people are around."

Like Leonardo da Vinci, then?

There weren't that many artists who didn't paint while looking at their subject, but there were enough of them that I understood immediately.

"When I do portraits, I have to rely entirely on my memories."

"Can you do that?"

"To perceive is to remember, as far as I'm concerned."

Now she sounded like Hannibal the Cannibal.

"If we talk like this for a couple of hours, you can leave, and I'll paint the portrait. But first I'll redo the cherry blossoms. I can make something of it even you can understand. Then I'll paint you. That'll take a bit of time – two color layers. Then it needs to dry...so you can come and get it tomorrow morning."

"You're giving it to me?"

"Sure. I don't need it. I have no interest in paintings once they're done. I'll sign it, so you can make a decent profit if you decide to sell it. And if you don't like it, feel free to tear it up. I won't care. Although it does seem like a bit of a waste. I plan to make it worth at least fifty million."

This was all so unromantic.

I sighed, and changed the subject.

"I heard you and Akane don't get along."

"We don't. At least, she certainly seems to hate me. Personally, I intend to continue respecting Sonoyama as an academic, as a researcher, and as one of the Seven Fools."

"You intend? But in actual fact...?"

Kanami smiled. "Sonoyama Akane herself, I absolutely despise."

Two hours later.

I left Kanami's studio, and headed back to Kunagisa's room. She was still in bed, but must have woken up at least once, because my watch was working again. She'd had a little fun with it, and the digital display was now in mirror writing, but it was still usable, so I put it on. I brushed her sleeping head, thanked her, and headed for Akane's room.

"Will you play without knights, bishops, or gold and silver generals?" I asked.

"I can do that one better," she said, grinning. And placed chess pieces on her side. "Let's blend things."

"Like the mixed martial arts of board games."

But even with that handicap, she crushed me. Destroyed me.

Seven times running.

Day 3 (2) Assembly and Arithmetic

Himena Maki

Genius Fortune Teller

If we overlook the fact that you're completely wrong, then you're mostly right.

Kunagisa was sleeping the sleep of the dead, but I shook her awake, forced her to wash her face, and then put her hair into pigtails. She was still so groggy I had to half-carry her to the dining room, by which time everyone else was already sitting down.

Two empty seats at the round table.

I put Kunagisa in one, and then sat down next to her. As I did, I looked around the table.

Of the twelve faces, the one that most drew the eye was – perhaps unsurprisingly – the owner of the mansion, Akagami Ilia. Ideas of beauty are so subjective that there is no point in saying she was beautiful; that was my opinion, but only my opinion. And my own subjective ideas of beauty were weighted heavily in favor of Akari, the maid. Not that it matters.

Really.

What I'm sure everyone would agree on is that Akagami Ilia was high class. Immaculate black hair in Victorian doll curls that did not really match her opulent but very modern dress. But such was the regal air about her that you scarcely noticed. [79] She was barely a year older than me, but just one look at her convinced you that breeding and upbringing made all the difference. Obviously, other things were important too, but that hardly diminished the impression. Some things always matter.

Akagami Ilia.

The black sheep of the Akagami Foundation's bloodline.

"Well, since Kunagisa has arrived, let the day's pleasantries begin," she said, putting her palms together like an excited child. "Let us eat."

Moments like this made her seem oddly immature. Perhaps she was just sheltered, but to an outsider's perspective, the distinction was hard to draw.

While most of our time on the island was spent as we pleased, there was one strict rule – we all ate supper together. It might seem an easy enough rule to follow, but apparently there was any number of geniuses who refused the invitation for no other reason. Apparently a lack of common sense and basic manners was something many brilliant minds had in common.

To Ilia's left and right were the maids. Teruko and Rei sat on her left, while Akari and Hikari sat on her right. Since Akari and Hikari looked the same, I could not be sure which sat closer. Where one might hope to tell them apart through bearing and expressions, I was too unobservant to pull it off. Kunagisa never seemed to have any trouble at all (not a surprise; she was, after all, Kunagisa Tomo) but I'd been told even Ilia was unable to tell them apart. Fortunately, neither of them seemed to mind.

"First, a toast...raise your glasses," Ilia said, lifting her own. We all followed suit. The glasses placed in front of me and Kunagisa had juice, not wine.

We were both underage.

Gorgeous food was laid out on the table. All prepared by the genius chef, Sashirono Yayoi. Starting with the platter closest to me: crowns of roast lamb, sweet potato soup frothed like cappuccino, foie gras terrine with truffle gnocchi, moule steamed Iso-style, Belgian-style eel in a green sauce, pickled herring, whale sashimi. Then there was ravioli sprinkled with Worchester sauce and served with ostrich carpaccio. Finally, there were several kinds of fruit, potato salad with egg in it, and mushrooms cooked in oil.

It was beyond me.

Yayoi was cooking for the tastes of twelve different

people, so the styles varied dramatically, but even then, the bulk of it I could not begin to imagine how it tasted from the name alone. Not that it mattered what she called the dishes as long as they tasted good.

I suppose.

Considering there was a dessert course after this, she had produced an incredible number of dishes. And her food was so amazing I always found myself eating too much. I would worry about putting on weight, but I was sure Yayoi had an eye on that side of things as well.

"It does take a genius to make it healthy and taste this good," I muttered under my breath – not for the first time.

Come to think of it, I'd chatted with her a little at lunch. It happened to run into her in the dining room, and seized the chance to ask her if the rumors were true.

If she really did have a way of making any dish better than any other chef.

Yayoi seemed to think the question amusing.

"I hate to let you down, but I'm not like Himena – I don't have any supernatural powers. I trained and practiced to get this good."

"I'm sure you did."

"But I can guess why those rumors got started. My nose and tongue are a little...no, a lot better than most people's." She stuck her tongue out at me. "How can I explain it...you know Helen Keller? She was blind, but she could tell people apart by how they smelled. I can do the same sort of thing – not that trick specifically, my nose isn't *that* good, but..."

Yayoi took my arm, and suddenly licked the back of my hand. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined something like this would happen, so I barely choked back a disgraceful yelp.

Her tongue still out, Yayoi gave me an Einstein smile.

"You're AB?" she said. "And Rh negative? Am I right?"

She was. I distinctly remembered being told I had a strange blood type when I got my passport. Everything she'd said was right, but...

"You can tell that by tasting my skin?"

"Your sweat, actually. My tongue can discriminate between two hundred thousand flavors at twenty levels of intensity. My sense of smell is about half that." Yayoi crooked her head slightly. It was very cute. "I'm not smart like Sonoyama, have no artistic sense like Ibuki, can't do anything with machines like Kunagisa, and have no special powers like Himena. There's nothing else I can do, so I've relied on my tongue and nose since I was a kid. I figured cooking was the only path in life for me."

Perfect gustation.

Like perfect pitch, but with the sense of taste; but unlike perfect pitch, it was not something you could train yourself to have. You could very well say that Sashirono Yayoi had been chosen by the gods. There were two types of people with extraordinary abilities. People that were chosen, and those that chose themselves. People that were valuable, and people that created their own value. Of course, all the work she'd put into living up to her gift was entirely to her own credit, but it was clear that Yayoi was still very firmly in the former category.

In other words, Yayoi had not become a chef of her own free will. She had been given an ability that led her to studying gastronomy, to travel the world, and to take advantage of it.

Flavor was fundamentally derived from the individual taste responses of the people eating. There was only so much control you had over how things tasted. Being good at cooking meant honing in on that incredibly narrow window. The added precision her senses provided went a long way towards explaining why her food seemed so remarkable.

But all of that was beside the point. In the end, her food was amazing, and who cared about anything else?

Sashirono Yayoi was seated next to Akari – at three o'clock, if we thought of the round table as a clock with Ilia at twelve.

At four o'clock was Sakaki Shinya. He'd been assisting Kanami for long enough that he did not look at all uncomfortable to be seated here.

Next to him, at five o'clock, was Ibuki Kanami. Her wheelchair was behind her. She didn't appear to be in a particularly bad mood, but neither did she seem cheery.

At six o'clock was Kunagisa Tomo. She had been placed directly opposite Akagami Ilia. I don't mean to imply any special significance to that fact, although it did make me a little nervous. For no reason at all. Especially since Kunagisa herself did not acknowledge the existence of the word 'nervous.'

That left me seated in lucky number seven.

To my left, at eight o'clock (despite being one of the Seven Fools) was Sonoyama Akane. Akane was intently focused on eating Yayoi's food. More of a gourmand that I would have expected. I suppose she was only human, and needed food to live...despite the tendency for people in her line to deny the fact. That said, she definitely was eating more than was strictly necessary. And with such evident enjoyment it was hard not to be encouraged by it. I imagined Yayoi would love to see everyone enjoy her food this much.

Next to Akane, at nine o'clock, was the genius fortune teller/psychic, Himena Maki. She had apparently changed at some point, and was now wearing a striped shirt with a halter neck and a pink cardigan slung over it, and capri pants with sheep printed on them. Her hair was up in twin tails. Sensing me looking at her, she glanced over, and gave me a sleazy grin before taking a big

bite of lamb. Like she understood everything, but said nothing. It was unnerving.

To say the least.

Anyway. At ten o'clock, was Chiga Teruko, who theoretically shared the same genes as Akari and Hikari, despite her black framed glasses. She said very little, and maintained a poker face at all times. She ate as if it was her duty to do so. I wondered if she had no sense of taste. How else could you eat this food with so little reaction?

At eleven o'clock was the head maid, Ilia's right hand, boss to the triplet maids: Handa Rei. While the triplets all had a touch of childishness to their features, Rei was more mature, like a strictly professional career woman. I had not heard her speak much, but apparently she was as strict as she appeared to be, and Hikari had complained about her any number of times.

And that...

...brought us to twelve.

Lucky number?

In this group?

What nonsense. What meaning could that possibly have? I was clearly out of my element. Completely out of place. Not that I'd ever, in all my nineteen years, been some place I belonged. Not in Kobe, not in Houston, not in Kyoto and most certainly not on this island.

In this great wide world, I was alone.

Not that I minded.

I liked being alone.

I'm not just saying that.

Even if I am.

"I do hate to change the subject," Ilia said, cutting into the conversation. She was always in control of the conversation, and never hesitated to step in if it had ceased to interest her. "I'm sure

some of you have already heard, so let me make it official. Our next guest – the next genius – has been decided."

All eyes turned towards her. Except Kunagisa, who remained fixated on her whale meat. It was no small task to deliberately attract her attention.

"The genius arriving here next week is more than equal to the present company. I hope you'll all join me in making them feel welcome."

A stir ran across the room. The phrase "more than equal" had touched a nerve. None of them wanted to be the first to speak, so eventually Shinya, as the non-genius, asked the question.

"What sort of genius is this? I have only heard rumors, but...some sort of jack-of-all-trades, they said?"

"Yes. We've only met once before, but...once was enough. I suppose you could say. Enough to become my hero." Ilia gazed upwards rapturously. "There's no other word for it. Like a detective in a mystery novel or the monster in a monster movie."

A monster...?

I could feel myself frowning. Ilia said the word without a trace of hesitation, but was that really an appropriate comparison? That was not a word customarily used to describe other humans – at least, not in a positive sense.

"Well, that is high praise indeed. I looking forward to it," Shinya said, with an exaggerated chuckle. "A genius who can do anything, you say? Even paint?"

"I have not personally witnessed anything like that, but I imagine it would not present much difficulty."

This must have got under Kanami's skin. She looked more than a little...she looked extremely annoyed. "Mind giving us a name, Ilia?" she snapped. "Someone like that must have made a name for themselves, surely."

I'd thought as much this morning, but she was very, very

proud. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing, but it certainly had its bad side. Since Kanami chose to live this way it might not be for me to criticize, but I could never live like that.

Ilia seemed to have no idea why Kanami would be angry (I'm sure she didn't), and said, "Aikawa."

Her voice so sweet it made Kanami's anger seem foolish.

"Aikawa is always very busy, so three days was the limit. I hope you will all bear in mind how much I admire...no, perhaps love is the word."

She blushed at this, a very childish expression. The kind that made you want to forgive any indiscretion. Ilia seemed to have an instinctive knack for that sort of thing.

Perhaps that, too, was breeding.

"Hmm...Aikawa..."

I'd never heard the name. It had not filtered down to my limited network. I looked at Kunagisa, but it was impossible to tell if she knew the name. She was still eating. She was always like this with anything outside her field of interest. More incorrigible than a child, and harder to handle than an animal. Perhaps I should be happy she was still in her seat.

"It will be such fun. To have Aikawa on this island again! I have asked so many times. This is like a dream. I hope it isn't."

She seemed quite carried away. Ilia must have quite a thing for this Aikawa fellow; she spoke of him like she'd had a crush on him for years.

The way she said his name...

There was a touch of reverence to it.

"Speaking of which, Kunagisa," Ilia said, looking across the table. "You're due to leave before Aikawa arrives."

"Mm? Mm. Mm, mm," Kunagisa grunted, her mouth full. Her chopsticks never stopped carrying more food to her lips. She had a set in each hand, as if one could never keep up, a fact that

probably proved there was no point in expecting table manners out of her. "Four days from now," she managed.

"That is *such* a shame. The opportunity of a lifetime. I would love for you to meet Aikawa too. I'm sure the two of you would get along famously. Can nothing be done?"

"Nope! Where I come from, you never change your mind once something's decided. They call me the living schedule. Goes for Ii-chan as well."

Apparently I had no voice in the matter. Coming to this island at all had not really ever been on my schedule.

Ilia nodded, looking genuinely disappointed. With a worried frown, she asked, "Are you...not enjoying your visit, Kunagisa? I'm told you rarely leave your room."

"Where I come from, people never leave their rooms. I'm enjoying myself. Having a blast. I always do, no matter where I am."

I winced at this remark. She just put it all out there. When the world inside your head was all that mattered, you were always having fun. What was it like to be unaware of any other emotion? There was something very tragic about having fun anywhere, any time.

I knew that only too well.

"I'm so glad," Ilia said, nodding. "But I'm sure you would enjoy meeting Aikawa. I'm sure you'd find it inspiring."

"Inspiring? Don't be absurd," Kanami pounced, as if she'd been waiting for it. "If you ask me, allowing others to influence you is proof you're inherently mediocre. Average. I have no idea what sort of person this Aikawa might be, but I find it hard to believe there can be any real value in meeting anybody."

"Well, that certainly is an unusual position." Need I even say it? The person most annoyed by Kanami's remarks was, of course, Sonoyama Akane. "For more than five years at the ER3

System, I was surrounded by the finest minds on the planet. Without that experience, I would not be what I am today. Time spent with brilliant people inevitably leads to self-improvement."

"At ER3? Don't make me laugh. Oops, too late. I'd rather die than be suffocated by some 'system.'"

"It was hardly suffocating. We were all free to do as we wanted, and hone our own skills."

"Free? You shouldn't just toss that word around willy-nilly. A system without restrictions is not a system. You were never more than a cog in that machine, Sonoyama. I've been on this island with you for a considerable time now, and I do not feel improved by it one bit."

Glares were exchanged. Neither one showed the slightest bit of shame for acting like this in front of the rest of us. I was mildly disappointed in them.

The maids all looked like they wanted to step in and stop the fight, but since Ilia was grinning happily, they said nothing. I was hardly the person to mediate, Yayoi seemed completely uninterested, Maki was studiously ignoring it, and Shinya had long since given up on intervention. So many people here, and none of us able to stop a fight. Astounding.

No, wait.

There was one.

"Human beings need groups to survive, Ibuki. People as proud of their independence as you need to take a good long look at themselves."

"You say that entirely because you are incapable of living without the help of others. Humans are not like migratory fish. And I am not particularly proud. I merely do not waste time with false humility. I simply state things as they are."

"So you say."

"So I say? That trick again? You think you can score a

cheap point with that, do you? Avoid speaking your mind and saying something you'll actually have to defend? Oh, yes, you are such a clever one. You wish!"

"My ears hurt."

The voice...

...belonged to Kunagisa.

Her lips pursed like a sulking child, she glared at the two of them.

"You are being very unpleasant, Kanami, Akane."

Everyone looked shocked.

None of them had expected Kunagisa to say something like this.

I'd seen it happen before, so I had known it was possible. Kunagisa Tomo *really* didn't like seeing people argue. That might seem at odds with her usual cheer, but not if you think about it. Kunagisa liked having fun, and did not like things that weren't fun. That was all there was to it.

"I'm sorry," Kanami said. "I got carried away."

I was mildly surprised that she was the first to apologize. That left Akane with no choice but to be an adult, and mutter an apology, staring awkwardly at the floor.

Neither one seemed inclined to speak again. The mood was not much improved, but at least things appeared to be settled...

Until Maki decided to break her silence.

"I smell trouble brewing," she said, with an impish grin. Just as things were quieting down, too.

I saw a gleam in Ilia's eyes. "Is that a prophecy?" she asked, eagerly. "What kind of trouble, Himena? I am very curious. What can you tell me?"

"Nothing. I have nothing further to say." Himena Maki

glanced at Kunagisa out of the corner of her eye. "I'm not arrogant enough to try and involve myself with the world."

"What does that even mean?" I said, before I could stop myself. Kunagisa herself was once more focused entirely on the acquisition of nourishment. Apparently she really had just been bothered by the noise. "What do you mean by that, Maki?"

"I mean nothing, I'm sure. Just as your actions are utterly without meaning. I see...hmm...you're the sort that gets angry on behalf of others. Not something I can recommend. It isn't a bad quality to have, but it's not a good one either."

"Really?" Ilia said, joining the conversation...or I suppose I was the one who had joined theirs. "I think it's a wonderful thing to be angry for a complete stranger. Not something many people manage these days."

"People who get emotional for other people also blame other people for anything that happens to them. I hate people like you more than anything."

It had been a very long time since anyone spoke like that to me. Maki gave me a long, appraising look.

"You let other people set your course. You're the type that ignores a traffic signal because everyone else is. Appalling in your own formlessness. The Japanese often speak of harmonizing without agreeing, but you neither agree nor harmonize. I'm not saying this is a bad thing. I won't say it's bad. I'm not saying that. I don't believe an individual's worth is determined by their individuality. A train that follows the rails is better than a train that doesn't move at all. So I refrain from comment on that. I simply hate people like that. Despise them. They blame everyone else for everything and never take personal responsibility."

Let myself be swayed by my surroundings.

Certainly, that was an accurate description of the way I lived.

But...

"You..."

I hated that.

Since meeting Kunagisa, that fact had begun to rankle.

"You have no right to speak to me like that, Himena Maki."

"Are you angry? Your boiling point is awfully low. Quick to anger...quick to forget?"

"Sh..."

Shut.

Shut up.

Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.

Shut the *fuck*

"Ii-chan."

Tug.

Kunagisa tugged my sleeve.

"This is nothing to get mad about."

.....

Kunagisa Tomo.

"...I know."

I could feel my body temperature dropping. Tension draining out of me. Not relief, but exhaustion. I had started out of my seat, but I settled back into it.

Maki gave Kunagisa an incredibly nice smile, and said, "I'm sorry. I was just joking."

Not the most pleasant dinner ever. There had been warning signs the first two days on the island, but the idea of a genius who could do anything had proven catalytic. God only knows what would happen once Aikawa actually showed up. But since I would be long gone, I suppose it was of no real concern.

What did concern me was why Maki had chosen to go

after me like that. Certainly, I had made a bad first impression, but that could hardly be the only reason. It was clear she genuinely hated me, but even then, why did she feel the need to make that known?

The opposite of love was not hate but indifference. If you didn't like someone, you would simply avoid them. I could see forcing yourself to interact with the other geniuses, but why bother with someone ordinary? Under any other circumstances, we would never have met.

It was very strange.

I was so preoccupied with it that I never thought to wonder what kind of trouble Maki had prophesied. I suppose nothing would have come of it even if I had, but I can't help regretting it in hindsight.

What else could I do?

Maki was the only person who could regret things in advance.

2

I borrowed Kunagisa's bath, and washed the unpleasantness away. By this time it was past ten. Kunagisa was on her revolving chair in front of her computers, but all three were powered down. She was busy happily spinning. Her semicircular canals were made of tougher stuff than mine.

"Take a bath," I said.

"No."

"I'll let you off the hook today if you take one tomorrow."

"Don't wanna."

"You're taking a bath tomorrow if I have to tie you up and throw you in. If you don't like the sound of that, better volunteer."

"Hmph. Hate baths." Kunagisa got off the chair, stretching. "I wish I was a fish. They never have to take baths. But they must be cold in winter. Hmm. That reminds me...say you

have some fish in an aquarium, right? And you raise the temperature of the water little by little. So slowly the fish inside don't notice. Eventually you raise it so much the water starts boiling, but because the fish have slowly adjusted to it, they swim around in boiling water without noticing anything strange. True fact. Now, Ii-chan, what does this tell us?"

"Global warming isn't a problem?"

"Bingo!" she cackled happily. Then she suddenly collapsed on the floor. Face first, no attempt to catch herself.

It hurt to watch.

"Ow! Owwww!"

Ya think?

"What's wrong with you?"

"I'm hungry!"

"Didn't you just stuff yourself?"

"So what if I did? I didn't eat anything else all day, so I'm sure it wasn't enough. I slept a bunch at noon so I won't need to sleep again until tomorrow. You have to sleep up and eat up or you'll never make it!"

"Human bodies don't actually work that way."

"Then I'm not human. Come, Ii-chan. Let's go find some food. Can you put my hair up first?"

"Yayoi's probably in bed already. She wakes up early, so she must sleep early too."

We could hardly wake her up and demand she cook a late night snack. Yayoi was a guest here too.

"I think Hikari is still up. Hikari's cooking is Hikari's cooking so I expect it's pretty good. If she's asleep too than you can cook, Ii-chan."

"Why me?"

"Watching your back when you cook? Meow."

Kunagisa proceeded to cackle wildly, an effect somewhat

diminished by the fact that she was still lying face down on the floor.

"Sigh...all right, all right, all right. Whatever you want. As you wish. Come over here and I'll put your hair up."

"Okely dokely!"

I combed Kunagisa's blue hair out, then put it up in simple pigtails. Then we headed for the living room.

"Sorry about earlier," I said.

"About what? Oh, with Maki? Okay then. I forgive you. You've calmed down a lot, Ii-chan. I didn't think I could stop you with a word. Did Houston change you?"

"I suppose. Live in a desert like that for five years, your priorities change. Not sure being a desert has much to do with it."

"You'll have to tell me what happened over there someday."

"...I'm not the only one who's changed. You only look the same."

"Everything changes. Panta rhei."

"Handa Rei?"

"Everything flows.' For a smart guy, you really don't know anything."

"I just have a bad memory. What I wouldn't give to upgrade to an average one."

At least enough to not forget good times.

Just enough of them that I could feel like I'd had my share.

"Ah! Akari detected!"

Kunagisa broke into a run down the hall. Akari was standing at the end of it – but at this distance, I couldn't begin to tell if it was Akari or Hikari. There was even a slight chance that it was Teruko sans glasses. But if Kunagisa said it was Akari, she was undoubtedly correct.

Akari and Kunagisa exchanged a few words while I

caught up with them, and then Kunagisa peeled off to join me again. Akari continued on down the hall in the other direction. It looked like she was still hard at work, despite the hour. Could not help but admire her work ethic, and sympathize with her plight.

"What'd you talk about?"

"She said Hikari's in the living room."

"Oh? Well, that makes things easy."

But of course, the world was hardly inclined to make everything easy.

Hikari was in the living room, but so was Sakaki Shinya, and my natural enemy, Himena Maki. They were sitting on three couches arranged around a table, chatting and laughing.

There were drinks and a plate of cheese laid out on the table. Hikari saw us coming in, and waved. "Oh, Tomo!" she called. Once seen, I could hardly run away. We were forced to join them.

Even worse, Kunagisa had quickly claimed the seat next to Hikari, so I had no choice but to sit next to Maki. Attempting to get out of this would definitely be running away with my tail between my legs, and simply not acceptable. Desertion in the front lines.

Maki appeared to know everything I was thinking, and gave me a sinister grin. "Welcome to my club," she said. "Sorry about before. I guess I hit a nerve." She sounded terrible insincere. "I mean it, really. Anyone would be angry. I rubbed you the wrong way."

"Not exactly."

"Right, it was more getting under your skin."

She gave me another evil smile. Was she drunk? Not, she was like this sober. Maybe the booze would help. Maki drained her glass of wine, and thrust it out towards me.

"Drink up, boy. Nothing like wine. Helps you forget all the

bad things."

"There's nothing bad enough to want to forget."

"And nothing good enough to want to remember," Maki said, with a lopsided smirk. "I don't think it's your bad memory that stops you remembering the good times. Life just doesn't have many ups or downs. Life is empty. Devoid of content. The void is more frightening than darkness. Ah ha ha. Isn't life great?"

Post-cognition, emotional empathy.

Labels that had obviously not been misapplied. Apparently she could also see across continents.

"...please stop it, Maki. You're being mean."

"Yes, I am. Drink."

"I can't drink wine. I'm underage."

"How very moral of you. Oh, damn it. There I go being frosty with you again. Gosh, Ii-chan, you're so righteous! Like that better? Hmph. You're no fun at all."

Maki grumpily put the glass back down in front of her.

Kunagisa must really have been hungry. She was wolfing down the plate of cheese. With both hands. Shocking manners. I knew better than to bother trying to correct her.

"Suprême, Valencay, Maroilles, and Mori no Chizu," Hikari helpfully explained. All of these were cheeses designed to go well with wine. I tried a bite of one, and it was certainly tasty, but only Kunagisa could eat a bunch of this without so much as a glass of water.

"How'd Kanami treat you?" Shinya asked, taking a bite of cheese. He clearly expected juicy details. "You modeled for her and everything?"

"Yeah, well. It went okay, I guess."

"She's impossible, isn't she?"

Was that any way to talk about your employer?

"I wouldn't say that."

"Really? Honestly, I've never met a woman more impossible than her."

I had.

Sipping wine next to me.

"I didn't have any real problems. I was sort of shocked when she suddenly tore up a painting, though."

Shinya winced.

"Oh, that. Yeah, when I stopped by the studio, she said, 'Shinya, dispose of this trash.' Who are you, Picasso? Should have warned you. That's all for show, don't pay it any mind. For all her success, she's barely worked for it, you see. That bugs her. So she fakes it."

"That...wasn't real?"

"Right. When she acts like that, she looks like a real artist, right? She made a lot of grandiose statements about art, too, right? Pretentious as hell. She always does."

"Um...but she sounded like she meant it? I thought so, anyway."

"Course she does. She means every word of it. But why bother telling anyone? Real artists never go on about that crap. Kanami's a genius, but she's no artist. She just pretends to be. At least, that's my opinion. I'd prefer she drop the act, but..."

Shinya shook his head, sadly. He took a sip of wine. He looked like he'd been born with the glass in his hand. I felt a tinge of jealousy.

"That's why I had you model for her. She almost never draws people."

"Really? She said she doesn't pick and choose."

"She doesn't, but...she has preferences. She hates people. No matter how you draw them, they find something to complain about. Since she was blind, and she still can't walk, and given her personality...she's not really good with people."

"Well, she is a genius."

Only genius I knew who got along with people was Gauss. Michelangelo was famously hard to get along with. But this was largely because he hated everybody.

101

"Plenty of non-geniuses aren't good with people," Maki said, sarcastically.

This was true.

"She's proud of making it on her own...which is why she has it in for Sonoyama."

Akane's talents had blossomed within a group, the ER3 system; Kanami believed wholeheartedly in the power of the individual. They were both geniuses, but polar opposites. It was hardly surprising they did not see eye to eye.

"I'm the one who taught her to paint," Shinya said. "When her eyes got better. But at the time, she had nothing. No family, no education to speak of. I gave her a brush hoping to cheer her up...but she was better than me before the month was out."

"You paint too?"

I had no idea.

He gave an awkward half-shrug. "Not since she overtook me. Verrocchio snapped his brush in two when he realized da Vinci had surpassed him. I know how he felt. When someone this incredible around, there's no need for me to paint."

Earlier today, Shinya had said the two of us were alike. I'd been puzzled by it then, but now I felt I understood.

The way Sakaki Shinya felt about Ibuki Kanami...

Reminded me how I felt about Kunagisa Tomo.

Despite his harsh words, it was clear his feelings for her never wavered.

"You live for other people too," Maki said, as if reading my mind. (An apt metaphor, in her case.) "Except in your case, I

approve."

"Why?"

"Because you don't blame others for it."

Everything she said got to me.

"Um, um," Hikari stammered, trying to head off the brewing storm. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Anything non-alcoholic."

"Just a minute."

She got a small bottle of ginger ale out of a tiny refrigerator in the corner, and brought it over, smiling.

"Here!"

She really did work hard. I decided it would be graceless to fight with Maki in front of her, so I trampled my feelings back down.

Which probably amounted to blaming others again.

Damn it.

Like I was dancing on the palm of her hand.

"I'd like a soda too," Kunagisa said.

"Coming right up!"

"That's right, you're a minor as well, Kunagisa," Maki said. "But does that even matter here? Feel free to join us."

"Don't tempt her."

"Oh, you her guardian now?" Maki chuckled. "Nice. Wonderful. How great to be young."

"You're young yourself," I said.

"I'm twenty-nine," she said, waving a hand dismissively.

I was more than a little surprised. She dressed like a kid, so I'd always assumed she was the same age as Ilia.

"Oh? Same age as Kanami, then," Shinya said. "Which, of course, is still quite young. I'm thirty-two, myself. You definitely start to feel the years, past thirty. Can't run easily any more."

"How old are you, Hikari?" I asked, seizing the chance.

"Twenty-seven."

"So that means Akari's twenty-seven too?"

"Um. Yes. We're triplets, after all."

Twenty-seven. The number echoed through my head. Twenty-seven. Akari and Hikari were both twenty-seven. They really didn't look it. Did the air on this island slow the aging process?

Nah.

This was hardly Pantena Island.

"Akane said she's thirty," Kunagisa piped up. "Yayoi was about the same. We're all young! Ilia's collecting young female geniuses."

"Sounds shady."

Kunagisa laughed, and popped another piece of cheese into her mouth. Apparently the piece was too strong for her, because she quickly chugged some ginger ale. But it must have gone down the wrong pipe, because she followed it up with a prolonged coughing fit. How had she survived this long?

Shinya sighed. "I thought bringing Kanami to this island, and spending time in this company...I thought it might be good for her. Like bringing a kid who won't go to school to camp. But I don't think it's working. It was pretty much my last hope, too. She's gonna be like this the rest of her life."

Understood by no one.

Making no attempt to be understood.

Relying on herself, and not on others.

Eating herself up.

"That's one way to live."

"Referring to who?" someone said, relentlessly. I need not say who.

"What brings you to this island, Himena?" Shinya asked. "I've been wondering. Hardly an ordinary vacation, is it?"

"It is a vacation, actually. So easy here. Get paid for living. Like paradise! With net access, I can even do my fortune telling from here. Marvels of the modern age. Never had such fun in all my life."

She was a parasite.

An advanced parasite.

"Pot calling the kettle black," she snapped, though I had not said a word. "What the hell did you come here for, anyway? Don't tell me it's just because Kunagisa asked you. That would just be stupid."

She knew the answer already.

Why did she come after me like this? Maybe there was no reason, no point. Maybe she just enjoyed mocking me. I could see that being true.

"It isn't," Maki snapped. She turned to Kunagisa. "But forget about you. Kunagisa! Why did you come here?"

"A whim, nothing more. I barely ever bother coming up with reasons for the things I do."

"You sure?" Maki said, with a wily smile. Despite her personality, she didn't appear to have any trouble getting along with people besides me. "Because unlike you, they aren't pointless."

I bit my tongue.

"Disgusted? Or just giving up? But I'll never stop. I'll toy with you till I get bored."

That smile was all sadism.

I knew how the mice must feel.

"Telepathy? You are amazing, Maki. But you do overdo it sometimes," Shinya said. "More than a few geniuses have fled the island after a run in with you. And this one's leaving soon – no need to push him out the door."

"I'm only playing, but everyone gets all upset. Psychic

discrimination!"

Psychic...

We were all using that term like it was normal, but did such a thing even exist? The ER3 System wasn't called Pan-Discipline for nothing; there were people studying paranormal psychology, and doing research on psychic powers. Psychokinesis, ESP, Dermo-optical perception, astral projection, and teleportation. I'd read any number of papers on things impossible to observe or explain, and met people who claimed to have these powers (they were lying.)

106

But the only conclusion all that led me to was: "Bullshit." The papers were just forcing an arbitrary rational onto all these 'unexplained' phenomenon.

The papers were certainly interesting reads, but that was ultimately all they were. They lacked the ability to convince anyone of anything.

"That just means you've got a narrow mind."

"You really don't get the concept of privacy, do you?"

"Can't help it. I see what I see, hear what I hear. No point in running away. Wherever you go, I know you like I know myself."

"Ooh, Maki!" Kunagisa purred. "You can do remote viewing too? I know lots of psychics, but none with as many powers as you! Multipowered! Amazing!"

Even though her past, future, and innermost thoughts might all be an open book, Kunagisa didn't seem to mind. Or was there simply nothing to her that she'd object to having out there?

"Always wanted psychokinesis," Maki said. "Instead, all I got was ESP powers. I mean, who doesn't see the fun in teleporting?"

Psychokinetic abilities were considered to be a completely

different class of powers from extra-sensory perception skills – at least, academically speaking. Parapsychology was currently undecided on psychokinesis, but moving steadily closer to proving the existence of some carefully defined ESP abilities. Researchers seemed to think psychokinesis was beyond human capabilities, while ESP was simply an extension of existing abilities.

"Only thing ESP's good for is fortune telling. Completely pointless," Maki sighed.

Certainly, that was the only real function for it in ordinary life, but even then, I remained dubious.

"Can you prove that you have psychic powers, Maki?"

"Don't really see the need. I mean, how do you go about proving that you are what you say you are? Show someone your ID card? If I was a licensed psychic, would you buy it? Doesn't matter to begin with, doesn't change a thing if it's true, false, or something else entirely. I'm not changing no matter how much I know."

"Is that so?"

"You won't let it drop, will you? Want me to read your fortune again?" Maki said, with a big smile.

Whoops. I hadn't been expecting that.

"I kinda wriggled out of it your first day here. You're a lucky guy, you know. I don't often tell fortunes for free."

"No thanks."

"That was fast! You really hate the idea, don't you? My teacher always said to do whatever people didn't want you to do, so I'm gonna go ahead and read your fortune anyway."

"I don't think that's what your teacher meant."

"You're quite a liar," Maki said, ignoring my protests. "You hate to let your emotions show, but you aren't good at controlling them. You're easily swayed by the opinions of those

around you, yet fairly independent. When faced with trouble you instantly flee, but you aren't stupid. And you don't like competing, do you?"

"This is just a cold read," I protested. "Doesn't prove anything. Anyone could get a decent hit rate."

"Really? Yeah, maybe. Then let me talk about you and Kunagisa. Both of you are people that don't *need* friends. So why are you together? What's the reason for your friendship? My, my, this is twisted. You're with Kunagisa because you're incredibly, insanely jealous of her. You envy her ability to express her emotions however she likes, and yet...she doesn't seem at all happy. She has everything you want and can do everything you can't but isn't happy – what a relief that must be. With her around, you don't care if things don't go your way."

"Really?" Kunagisa asked, staring at me in surprise.

Regardless of whether it was true or not, this was hardly something to say in front of Kunagisa. I shook my head.

"Not true, Maki. I'm not sure what made you think I'm that complicated, but I'm really a very simple man."

"Oh? Well, that might be true. And it might not be true."

"Maki!" Kunagisa said, moving to sit next to her. "Then why am I with Ii-chan?"

"Sorry. Can't read your past, Kunagisa." Maki shrugged. "There are people I just can't read. Incompatible or something. And those people tend to disrupt the signals off everyone else too. Not fun – a little scary, even, like being somewhere poorly lit. That's why I've been so cranky."

So why take it out on me?

Hardly fair.

"In that case, Himena, let me ask – how does it feel to see the future, or read people's minds?" Shinya said. "I ask only out of curiosity."

"Hmm. That's like asking a spider how the world looks with eight eyes, you know. I'll try and explain...like watching TV. But there are TVs all over the room, and I don't have a remote for any of them. Can't turn them off, and I've got nothing better to do, so I have to watch. Can you imagine having a lot more brains than most people do?"

No.

"Now then, our unimaginative friend here distracted me, but I still haven't heard why you came to this island, Kunagisa."

"Like I said, a whim."

"No...I may not be able to read you, but I can tell that isn't true."

"Hnya," Kunagisa grunted. A little at a loss. I didn't like the way Maki had asked, but I was curious to know the answer. Why had Kunagisa agreed to come to Wet Wing Raven Island? Despite her usual extreme refusal to leave her house.

"Okay then," she said, toying with a sliver of cheese on her tongue. "I was interested in a case that happened here a long time ago."

3

What she might have said beyond that, we didn't hear.

"What case?" I started to ask, but nearly bit my tongue. The words never left my mouth, and even if they had, Kunagisa would never have heard them – nobody could have. Even I would not have heard them.

They would have been drowned out by the roar.

And the vibrations.

It was an earthquake.

Shinya yelped aloud.

Unflappable in all circumstances (by nature of her profession), Hikari quickly told us to remain calm, but this was not really very effective.

Maki leaned her full weight back on the couch, completely calm, as if she had predicted the earthquake.

I tried to remember what I'd known about earthquakes in seventh grade, the last time I was in Japan. First there would be a small tremor, then a bigger one. One was the S wave and the other was the P; I didn't remember which was horizontal and which was vertical or anything like that, but it probably wouldn't help me deal with it now.

At any rate, a moment later an even bigger tremor hit us. Kunagisa was sitting stunned, as if she had no idea what was happening, so I quickly pulled her onto the couch, and hunched over her. There was a chandelier right over her head, and if it had fallen, it would have flattened her. I could probably soak the impact, I thought.

But my concern was unnecessary, since the tremor passed quickly. Quickly in relative terms, of course; to my mind, it seemed to last a good five minutes, only slightly better than putting your hand on the stove.

It was probably less than ten seconds.

"Is it over?" Kunagisa asked, under me.

"It's over," Maki said. She was psychic. I suppose we could trust her on this point. Kunagisa began struggling to get out, so I sat up, freeing her.

"An earthquake? And a big one. What magnitude?" Shinya said, looking around. Bottles and cups had fallen over on the table, and Hikari was reflexively cleaning them up. "Sorry, Hikari – can I borrow the phone? I'm worried about Kanami."

He pointed to the intercom phone, and Hikari nodded.

Shinya hastened over to it.

"Is there a radio here, Hikari? To check the magnitude...or Tomo, is it on the net yet?"

"It is...where are we, technically? Kyoto? Or not...?"

"Magnitude on this island is three or four on the Japanese scale," Maki said, as if she did this every day. "Not clear which, since we're in an odd location. Epicenter's near Maizuru. It was a five there. Doesn't seem like anyone was hurt."

"How do you know?" I asked, knowing it was rude of me, but feeling like it was my duty as a person of sense.

Maki rolled her eyes at me. "I just know, okay? You may be smart, but you're pretty slow on the uptake. And have no memory. Wait, does that make you an idiot? Anyway, if you need a metaphor, how's 'As obvious as a house on fire?' Ibuki and the others aren't hurt either."

"The remote viewing thing?"

I supposed that meant distance was no longer a factor. She could watch TV playing on the other side of the ocean, and predict what she would see if she was there. Using several ESP skills in tandem.

Of course, in this particular case, Maki could say whatever popped into her head, and we had no way of confirming it. Everything she had said was well within the realms of an educated guess.

But it was probably true that no one in the mansion had been hurt. And that was all we really needed to know.

Shinya came back from the phone. "Kanami's fine," he said. "She's in the studio. The paint cans she had on a shelf all fell over and made a mess, but she's uninjured."

"Doesn't need your help?"

He was her assistant, after all; and with her in a wheelchair...but Shinya just shook his head.

"She'd be pissed if I did."

"Why do you say that?"

"She told me not to come," he said, smiling ruefully. "She's busy working. On your portrait, actually. She says it's

turning out well and doesn't want me distracting her."

"With a model as crap as you, even Ibuki must be struggling."

"You really hate me, don't you?"

"Yes," Maki said, totally serious.

Sheesh.

No matter. Story of my life.

I turned towards Hikari.

"You get a lot of earthquakes here?"

"Not a lot, but I've felt a fair number in the middle of the night."

"This was larger than most, though?"

"I do hope nothing big fell over."

"Ask if you need any help."

"No, that would be inappropriate," Hikari said, smiling.

"We'll take care of everything in the morning. Rei will see to it."

If she ever had kids, they'd be raised properly. If I hadn't met her here, under these circumstances, I might really have fallen in love. I knew perfectly well it was a meaningless thought to entertain, but I thought it anyway.

"Nnyyya. Almost forgot what earthquakes are like," Kunagisa said, sitting up and trying to untangle her hair. "I hope my computers are okay. I think they are. And if the epicenter's in Maizuru my apartment'll be fine. When was the last big earthquake? The Kobe one was after you left for Houston, right, Ii-chan?"

"Yeah."

I vaguely remembered watching the news in my cramped dorm room.

"Not a good day for me. I was still in Kobe then! Almost all my computers crashed for real. Startled me!"

Startled? That was all?

"Want to check on your room? You must have had enough cheese by now. Let's go back."

Seeing this as my chance to escape, I seized it. If Maki kept after me like that, I had no confidence in my ability to keep my temper. Best to leave before anything else happened.

As if she completely saw through my craven mind, Maki grinned wickedly at me, but I ignored her with all my might, took Kunagisa's arm, and escorted her back to her room.

The three PCs...or two PCs and a work station...were all safe and sound, securely fastened in place.

Kunagisa yawned, and stretched.

"Goin' to bed now. Being full makes me sleepy. Ii-chan, take my hair down."

"You can do that yourself."

"The pigtails are so far back! I'm not that flexible, you know. I could to it, but not without risking serious injury. I broke my arm the last time I tried."

"Okay, okay. You really are adorable, you know."

I pulled the bands free from her hair, and ran a comb through it. Kunagisa Tomo giggled all the while. Sinister. When I was done, she dove right into bed. Buried her body in white cushions, rolling happily back and forth.

"At least take off the coat. Like I keep saying. Aren't you hot?"

"There are memories wrapped up in this coat! It never comes off!"

"Memories? Okay."

What memories? Even the psychic fortune teller, Himena Maki, couldn't read Kunagisa Tomo's mind, or see her past...but these must be memories from her time with her Team.

"Ii-chan, you and Maki are almost as bad as Kanami and Akane."

"Not my fault! She's got it in for me." Kanami had said something very similar, admittedly. "I don't really have anything against Maki myself."

"I know. You never really hate or despise anyone. At most you find them irritating.

"Do I?"

"I'm kidding," she said, with an evil smirk. "But I do know you've never fallen in love. Not really."

"No."

"That's what I love about you."

She grinned.

Hunh.

She was acting weird. Kunagisa didn't usually toy with people like this. Had she mistaken a wine glass for her ginger ale? I'd never seen her drunk before, so I could not begin to imagine what she was like.

"Say, Tomo..."

"Whaaaat?"

"What's your take on psychic powers?"

"Hmm. I wouldn't mind if they existed," she said, still smiling happily. "I don't want them myself, but I like the idea of them. Having Santa Claus is better than not having him, you know? Same thing."

"I should have known."

Of course she'd think that way.

Perhaps it was the right way to think about them. Whether they existed or not, it wouldn't change my life at all...present situation excepted, obviously.

While I was on this island...

But only while I was.

"I'm heading back to my room. Get some sleep too. See you tomorrow. If you're sleeping now, then I'll come wake you in

the morning. We can eat breakfast together."

"Hey, li-chan!" she called, as I opened the door.

I turned to look. She was lying flat on the bed, beckoning.

"Let's fool around."

I let a full second pass. "I don't think so."

"Awww. You're no fun. Coward! Chicken! Bwak bwak bwak!"

I closed the door behind me, and went down stairs, heading for the storeroom where I slept. I crossed my fingers that I wouldn't run into Maki in the hall, but I saw no one. Maki must be planning on drinking with Shinya all night.

As I opened the storeroom door, I noticed there was a lock on it. I suppose storerooms usually did have locks, but if someone locked it while I was sleeping, I'd have no way of getting out. Even if I stood on a chair, I'd never reach the window. I'd be imprisoned there. Of course, there was little risk of it; nobody stood to gain anything by it.

I closed the door behind me, and laid down on the futon, staring up at the ceiling.

Thinking about what Maki had said about me.

My, my, this is twisted. You're with Kunagisa because you're incredibly, insanely jealous of her. You envy her ability to express her emotions however she likes, and yet...she doesn't seem at all happy. She has everything you want and can do everything you can't but isn't happy – what a relief that must be. With her around, you don't care if things don't go your way.

I sighed.

Damn it.

"Read me like a book."

Akane had described us as co-dependent, but Maki was much closer to the truth.

Kunagisa Tomo was...

Everything I most wanted to be. Probably.

Or, no...not that. She was....

She was...

"Then what?"

I'd picked a college in Kyoto rather than Kobe because that's where she lived. I couldn't say she wasn't a big part of why I left Houston.

But why?

Like Kunagisa said, I didn't have very strong feelings about people, good or bad. If someone made things hard for me, that was no more frustrating than unexpected rain. No matter how much Maki hated me, no matter how nasty Kanami had been, I felt nothing in response.

I sometimes wondered...

If I was even human.

I never knew how people felt.

If the powers Maki talked about really did exist...

Then I just might want them.

"No...not really."

I shook my head.

Knowing how people felt just caused problems. Like flinging Pandora's box open, and leaving it there for the rest of my life. My nerves weren't up to that.

"It's all nonsense, anyway."

Traveling was a bad idea. It just made me think too much. About things I was better off not thinking about. Dangerous things, things that could tear me apart.

Four more days.

I could keep it together.

I was good at keeping it together.

I was used to it, anyway.

Pain, suffering...

I was used to both.

"But I can't say I've ever liked them."

I looked forward to leaving the island, and returning to normal. I drifted off to sleep with that thought echoing through my mind.

But when I woke up the next morning, I would discover...

That the first three days had actually *been* normal.

Ibuki Kanami - Genius Painter

Sakaki Shinya - Ibuki Kanami's Assistant

Day 4 (1) – Beheading 1

There's always someone better, but for the best, it's all downhill.

It was a ghastly sight.

What it reminded me of more than anything was Gruber Norbert's painting, "River." The same creepy marbled river covered half of this side of the floor of Kanami's studio.

Paint knocked over by last night's earthquake, presumably – there were upturned cans scattered here and there, and a shelf made of iron pipes had fallen over. The paint cans must have been stacked on that shelf, and spilled when the earthquake knocked it over. The "River" was the result. So I imagined; a guess, but more than likely an accurate one.

This alone was an alarming sight, but the real problem lay with what was found on the river's far bank. Imagination and guesswork offered no explanation for it, and it most certainly could not be blamed on the earthquake. No earthquake in the world was capable of such a thing.

A human body lay on the floor, but there was nothing above the neck.

Headless.

Beheaded.

Two ways of describing the same horrible thing.

The body without a head was wearing the same dress Kanami had been a day before. An elegant dress, a dress she'd been careful to keep perfectly clean even when painting...but now it was stained with blood, and would never be worn again.

The person who had worn it no longer existed.

Or to be strictly accurate...

The person who had worn it was no longer alive.

"This is...gross," I muttered, without thinking. Perhaps that

did not need to be said aloud, but I genuinely said it without thinking.

The stench of paint thinner.

Near Kanami's body was her empty wheelchair, and a canvas. Now that I looked, I realized it was a portrait of me.

It was very well done. Even at this distance, with the river between us, I could tell. It was stunning, but in a way that stunned my body rather than my mind. A fact that was almost more shocking than the headless body.

I remembered what Kanami said the day before.

If you have to choose your judges, it is not worth calling art.

She had proven that here.

Ibuki Kanami had been a genius.

Able to rock my very core.

Which made it all the more tragic. I hadn't thought anything was truly tragic in quite a while, but I genuinely did think this was.

Kanami was dead.

Ibuki Kanami was dead.

"Why?"

Ibuki Kanami had been beheaded.

No human could survive having their head cut off. Even Rasputin would have died from that. And Kanami had been ordinarily mortal.

"Well, we can't just leave her like this," I said, since no one else was saying anything.

Kunagisa was staring at Kanami's body with her lips pursed, as if she suspected something, or something puzzled her. Something about the scene didn't make sense to her. But I didn't have time to wonder why; if I tried ascribing reasons to everything Kunagisa did I'd never have time for anything else.

But when I moved to step forward, Kunagisa grabbed my arm.

"Wait, Ii-chan."

"What? Why?"

"The paint isn't dry."

"Really?" I knelt down and poked it with my finger. My finger sank right into the marble river. "Right. But at a time like this..."

There was a beheaded body on the other side. Who cared about getting your shoes dirty?

"I said, wait."

Before I could do anything else, Kunagisa took off her big black coat, and tossed it into the center of the paint river. It formed a stepping stone in the center of the water.

"Didn't that coat mean a lot to you?"

"Not the time or place for that."

I considered saying something about how easily she discarded the memories she had insisted the coat held, but like she said, this could wait. And she'd already done it, so I jumped, landed on the coat, and jumped again to the far bank.

I cleared my throat.

I hadn't been this close to a headless body in a while. I took off my jacket, and covered Kanami's upper body with it.

I turned back to the crowd at the door, and shook my head. As if that was even necessary.

"Well then," Iliia said, at length. "Shall we gather in the dining room? There seems to be a lot we must discuss."

With that, she headed off down the hall. The four maids hurried after her, and the others slowly followed suit.

At last only three of us remained – Kunagisa, me...and Shinya.

He was staring at her blankly, his face pale.

"Shinya," I said, hopping back onto the coat, and over to the door. "Let's go. Staying here..." wouldn't help. But I couldn't bring myself to say that.

"Mm...yeah. I know," he muttered absently, and didn't move. It was like he could not understand what he was looking at, or like his brain was refusing to let him understand it.

I knew how he felt.

I would be the same if that had been Kunagisa in there. Or worse. I might have fallen apart, collapsed in a flood of tears. Since I normally kept my emotions in check, as Maki said, that was hard to imagine, but it seemed likely enough.

Shinya's response was more dignified.

He was pale, but he was keeping it together, even responding when spoken to. He was hanging on – barely, but nevertheless, he had his wits about him.

I was a child.

Shinya was a grown up.

What their relationship had really been – whether he was only Kanami's assistant, or something more...I didn't know.

But...

The sad look in his eyes the night before...

And the way he looked now...I felt I understood.

"Let's go on ahead, Ii-chan." Kunagisa said, pulling my arm.

"...yeah."

The curtains were drawn on our peaceful time on the island.

And opened on what was to come.

2

The morning of the fourth day had started like it always did, in the most ordinary way imaginable.

I woke up at the usual time, and went to Kunagisa's room. She was already awake, and sitting at her computer, checking e-mail. She ordered me to put her hair up before I even had time to say good morning, so I put it in two big pigtails on top of her head – the legendary twin tails. I figured this would be easier for her to take down herself.

"I think I want to eat breakfast today," Kunagisa said, so we went downstairs. I glanced into the living room, and Maki and Shinya were still sitting there, drinking wine. They really had been at it all night. They seemed a little old for that, but I knew better than to say that out loud.

Using my stock of basic manners, I invited them to eat with us, and they agreed, so the four of us headed for the dining room. There we found Akane, and, surprisingly, Ilia.

"What a rare treat," Ilia said. "All of us here in the morning...there must be a reason for it. Let us call the others as well. I like the idea of having the full company assembled for breakfast once in a while."

She turned to Akari, and had her fetch Yayoi from the kitchen, and track down the other maids.

"Then I'll go call Kanami," Shinya said. "She must be done working by now. Might still be asleep, but she's a morning person – at least, she's no more bad tempered than usual."

He chuckled at his own line, then looked at me.

"Can't wait to see how your portrait turned out!" he said, and left the room.

Thus, we almost had breakfast with all the guests...but it was not to be.

When Shinya came back, it was to deliver Kanami's obituary.

"Kanami...she's been murdered!" he said.

Thinking about it, it was a rare kind of corpse that could

only be described that way. A beheaded corpse was one of them – there was no way it could be natural causes, or an accident, or suicide.

But...

Even so...

Murder.

And no ordinary murder.

"I...well...after dinner, I was with Kunagisa the whole time. I borrowed the bath in her room, and then she said she was hungry, so we went down to the living room. We met Akari in the hall...remember? Good. Then Hikari and Maki and Shinya were in the living room, and there was...an earthquake. Everyone felt that? We were in the living room until then. Then I took Kunagisa back to her room, and...went to sleep too. I work up at six, and I've been with her ever since."

Their gazes bore into me, but I think I kept my voice level. We were sharing alibis.

Why I had to go first, I did not know, but Ilia had pointed at me and asked me to begin, so I had to answer. Apparently she considered me the primary suspect.

We were in the dining room.

Eating breakfast. It was only a little cold.

But nobody seemed particularly hungry after seeing a headless corpse. I didn't have much appetite myself, but Yayoi's cooking was so good I felt I had to at least make the effort.

The round table.

Ilia, Rei, Akari, Hikari, Teruko, Akane, Maki, Yayoi, Shinya, Kunagisa Tomo, and me. All sitting where we always did. But the seat at five o'clock, Kanami's seat, was empty. It would never be filled again.

Ilia listened carefully to my story, and then turned her

head to the maid at one o'clock. "Is that true, Hikari?"

"Yes," Hikari nodded. "The earthquake happened around...one in the morning, was it? The five of us were talking in the living room. I can vouch for that much."

129

"Nobody left? Even for a short while?"

"Nooo," Hikari said, a little worried. "I don't think so. But I'm not sure I can say that for sure."

"Nobody did," Kunagisa said. "My memory is perfect. I can guarantee nobody left the living room while I was there."

"Okay," Ilia said, closing her eyes. "Then you and Kunagisa, and Sakaki, Himena, and Hikari can all provide alibis for each other until the earthquake occurred. What about after that?"

"I was asleep, alone in my room. I have no alibi."

"Thank you. Before asking any of you for your alibis, I suppose I should provide my own. I was in my room with Rei and Sashirono, talking. Last night's dinner was particularly magnificent, and I simply had to know the recipe. Isn't that right, Sashirono?"

Yayoi seemed a little surprised to be addressed suddenly, but she soon nodded.

Rei shook her head a little, but said nothing. She was a very collected individual. While not as dedicated to silence as Teruko, Rei was also much less talkative than I had imagined. Devoted to her work, and spoke of little else, I suppose.

"After the earthquake, I...went back to my room," Yayoi explained, haltingly, as if searching her memory.

"That's right," Ilia nodded. "Rei and I talked until morning. Since Kunagisa is leaving soon we hoped to think of some grand entertainment to hold on her last day. As is our wont. We completely missed our chance to sleep, so we decided to have

breakfast first."

So Ilia and Rei provided each other with a perfect alibi. Yayoi's alibi was the same as mine and Kunagisa's, only good until the earthquake.

"Shinya and I can vouch for each other, at any rate," Maki said. "Kunagisa's already covered us until the earthquake, and after that, Shinya and I drank the rest of the night away. Ain't wine grand?"

How trustworthy was the word of a drunk? She must have read my mind again, because she glared at me. But I said nothing, so she settled for prompting Shinya for confirmation.

"Oh...yes, right," he said, eyes barely focused.

"Hmm...Hikari? What did you do after the earthquake?"

"I went back to our room. Akari and Teruko were there. I went to sleep. I woke at five, and started work..."

"So Akari and Teruko? Akari, you answer."

"I had no further duties after dinner," Akari said, placing one hand on her cheek, thoughtfully. "So Teruko and I were in our room the whole time. After the earthquake, Hikari joined us, and we all went to sleep."

"You share a room?" I asked.

Akari shot me a look. She must not have expected me to speak.

"Yes, the three of us share a room. What of it?"

"Nothing."

I was just curious. I wanted to ask if they shared a futon, but I decided that would be pushing my luck.

Hmph.

So Akari and Teruko had alibis before the earthquake, but they were asleep after that, and unable to vouch for each other.

Teruko simply inclined her head slightly in agreement with Akari's statement, but uttered not a sound. She seemed to

express all her thoughts in as minimalistic a manner as possible.

"This is such a mess," Ilia said, and turned towards the final guest, Sonoyama Akane. "What about you?" she asked. "How did you spend your evening?"

Akane had sat through all of this with her arms folded, eyes closed. She sighed, and opened one eye. "As you can probably guess from the way nobody mentioned my name...obviously, I spent no time with anyone."

No beating around the bush.

"After dinner, I went to my room, and sat at my computer. Working on some 3D modeling, but...well, the details don't matter. There's a log of my work, which you could check; it might prove something, but such things are easily faked. Can't call it an alibi."

"I know so little about computers...is this true, Kunagisa?"

"Mm?" Kunagisa looked up (had she stopped paying attention?) and said, "Mmmm...if you know what you're doing, you can alter a log pretty easily. Are you good with computers, Akane?"

Akane laughed, weakly. "Not much point in me answering."

"Oh, right," Kunagisa nodded. "Hmm...then...well, with the right tools, even an amateur can pull it off. It's just not that hard. The software's readily available."

"Is there any way to check if a log has been altered?" I asked.

"Yes, but...you can fake that stuff too. Basically, computers can do whatever you want them to. Makes it hard for one to provide any sort of alibi."

Kunagisa Tomo.

It was her credentials as the Team's leader that led to her being invited here. She was the authority on this subject. Which

meant Akane had no alibi at all.

"But I do plan to defend myself a little, here," Akane said. "I have some sense of self-preservation, after all. Let the record show that I am not the killer. I do hate artists, but that doesn't mean I think they're worth killing. Even in life it's as if they are dead. No reason for me to go to the effort of finishing them off. My conscious is clear."

Presumably she meant conscience. She didn't seem to be bluffing, or trying to talk her way out of it. Didn't seem to be acting.

"Hmm. Well...wait a moment, please. I want to get this straight in my head."

"Um, wait a second...first..." That was awkward. How could we wait a second before waiting a moment? "Um, Ilia...what are you trying to do?"

"What?"

"This has been bothering me, and I know this is your island, and your mansion, and I'm probably speaking out of turn...and I'm not even an invited guest. But I have to ask. Ilia, what are you doing?"

"What does it look like? Deduction," she said, smiling sweetly. "I would have thought that obvious. Someone murdered Ibuki. And when I say someone, I mean someone *here*. As you say, this is my island, and my mansion. One of my guests has been murdered, and one of us is the murderer. I can hardly let this crime stand unsolved."

Ilia looked around at all of us, smiling.

She did have a point. This was an isolated island. One with no other people, in the middle of the ocean, cut off from the world.

Wet Wing Raven Island.

Population twelve. When one of those twelve was

murdered, the murderer must be one of the surviving eleven. Even a child could see that much. Yet...

"Still," Ilia said, sighing. "Yet another death..."

Mm?

Another...? What did that mean?

"And a beheading! Is this island cursed? Himena, could you please do a reading on that for me?"

"You're the one who's cursed, Ilia," Maki said, instantly. "The island is just an island. If anyone here is cursed, it would have to be you."

Most people would be put out by something like that, but Ilia just smiled. "Maybe so," she said.

Ah ha. I'd been wondering how Maki could be so curt and snarky and yet get along with everyone but me, but...this was why. The other people here simply didn't really care what anyone else said.

"Mm. But this new case is a simple one," Ilia said. "There may not be much deducting to do. You all agree, of course? After all, we know the time of death."

"Do we?"

"Yes. You saw it for yourself. The earthquake knocked the paint over, and Ibuki's body was on the other side. How wide was that paint river?"

No one answered, so I did.

"At least three meters across."

"Yes. Not exactly easy to jump across, is it? Therefore, the case must have happened *before* the earthquake."

So the earthquake had knocked over the shelves, and the paint had formed a marbled river. What did that mean? That the tremors had been larger than I'd imagined. And not only that...

The river itself was significant.

"Wait," Akane said, frowning. "That makes it sound really

bad for me, Ilia. After all..."

After all, before the earthquake, everyone but Akane had an alibi.

I had been with Kunagisa. Hikari had been with Maki and Shinya. Akari had been with Teruko. And Ilia had been with Rei and Yayoi. All of us had someone who knew what we'd been up to.

Ilia's reasoning was sound. Once the earthquake made that river of paint, there was no way to get across. Not without stepping in the paint and leaving footprints, at any rate.

In which case...

The murder could only have taken place *before* the earthquake. At which time, Akane was the only one without an alibi. That definitely wasn't good for Akane.

Akane clucked her tongue. "Ilia, let me get to the point – you think I did it?"

That definitely was getting to the point.

"Yes," Ilia said, likewise. "Who else could it be?"

Akane looked away, and said nothing. She clearly wanted to argue, but she was one of the Seven Fools, and far too smart to think any arguments would prove effective. Given the slight (extremely slight) connection I had to her, I wanted to defend her, but if one of the Seven Fools could think of no defense, a program drop out like me could hardly save the day.

There was a long, awkward silence. At long last, Kunagisa's voice broke through it.

"You're wrong," she said. "Your theory is mistaken, Ilia."

"Oh? How so?" Ilia said, apparently delighted. "Oh, I see...I failed to account for the possibility of a conspirator. That certainly is the case, and would cast suspicion on all our alibis."

"No, even without that consideration, the fundamental pretext of your theory is incorrect. Right, Ii-chan?"

"Hunh?" I had not expected her to involve me. "She's wrong?"

"Yes, Ii-chan. Tell her. About last night."

"About last night...what about it?"

Kunagisa gave me a long, withering look. She was not often struck speechless like this.

"I'm sorry," I said. "My memory's not as good as yours."

"Mmah. You really forgot? You don't have a bad memory, Ii-chan. You have no memory. How could you forget something so important? Right after the earthquake! Shinya called Kanami!"

"...oh." "Oh." "Oh!"

Hikari and Shinya both joined me in chorus.

Right. Shinya had spoken to Kanami on the phone...*after* the earthquake. He had made sure she was okay. That nothing was wrong with her.

Okay. That was as important as Kunagisa said. That changed things...but how? Where did we stand now?

"In other words, Kanami must have been killed after the earthquake."

"Wait," Ilia said, flustered. She held out her hand to stop Kunagisa. "But the paint river..."

"What that means, Ilia, is..." Kunagisa said, and paused dramatically. "The studio...was a locked room."

We all exchanged glances.

It did seem impossible to jump over the river of paint. It was three meters wide. It might be possible to vault it like a long jump, there was no room to get up to speed. That would normally mean what Ilia had said, that the crime must have happened before the earthquake. But Shinya's word contradicted that. Shortly after the earthquake Kanami was still alive, and still had her head.

"Sakaki," Ilia said. "Are you absolutely sure it was Ibuki

you spoke to?"

Looking pale, Shinya hesitated for a long moment, but at last, he nodded. "Yes, it was definitely her. I'm sure of it. She said she was working...and the paint had fallen over and made a mess. So I know...that she was still alive after the earthquake."

"I heard Sakaki talking on the phone," Hikari said. "He asked to borrow it...so I believe she really was alive at the time."

"Although not for much longer," Shinya said, face in his hands. "If I had gone to the studio instead of sitting back down...oh, what's the use. What use am I?"

There was nothing for us to say. In the end, what we really had to fear was not earthquakes, or lightning, or fires. Not those things at all.

The act of regret, I'd heard, serves to provide the heart some relief. By wallowing in regret, you could temporarily escape the problem before you. Placing all the blame on yourself in the past, without ever having to take real responsibility.

As long as you regretted something, that made you right.

Shinya's behavior was nothing to criticize. This was simply how the human mind functioned. My own heart, unable to understand the delicate workings of the human mind in any other way, was far more worthy of criticism.

"Then this is a very strange story," Akane said, scratching her chin. "From what Shinya, Hikari, and Kunagisa tell us, the murder must have happened after the earthquake. But after the earthquake, there was a river of paint to cross. Which means nobody could possibly have killed her."

"Right, Akane," Kunagisa said, for once actively interested in what was going on around her. "This is a very strange case."

"I would never have thought of this as a locked room," Ilia said, nodding sagely. "The paint still wasn't dry in the morning,

was it? Then anyone crossing the river to get into the room would have left footprints. Hmm. Akari – where exactly is the intercom phone in Ibuki's studio?"

"On the stand next to the window," Akari replied.

Ilia folded her arms thoughtfully.

"Kunagisa, if you've posed the problem, do you also have a solution? Do you know who did it?"

"Not at all," Kunagisa laughed, with mystifying confidence.

I had no idea either.

None of us did.

"What about the window? Is it possibly to get in that way?" Shinya asked.

"On the second floor?" Hikari said. "I don't think so. And the window was locked from the inside...."

"There's no way to open it from the outside?" I asked.

"Not really," Hikari said, shrugging.

Right. So the window was not a possible entrance. It didn't happen before the earthquake. And it didn't happen after it.

Okay.

Then we were at an impasse.

There was another long silence, and gradually we all wound up staring at Akane.

"Mm?" Akane said, taken aback. "Really? I thought we'd already moved beyond suspecting me."

"Not in the least," Ilia said. "After all, it's physically impossible to leap across that river. Therefore the crime must have happened before the earthquake."

"What about Shinya's phone call?"

"There are other explanations. He might have been hearing things."

Hearing things? Gibberish. Absolute gibberish. "I think

that's pushing it," I said.

"I disagree," Ilia said. "If not hearing things, perhaps he was merely mistaken. The river is impossible to cross. Logically, the only time the murder could have happened was before it existed. Which means Akane is the only possible suspect."

"Now I'm worried," Akane said, as if she really was worried. "If I may be permitted a futile resistance, I think Akari and Teruko have a pretty weak alibi. They are family, after all. Legally speaking, such alibis are inadmissible."

"We are not speaking of the law," Ilia snapped.

"Thought not," Akane said, sighing. "But I can't condone deciding the killer through the process of elimination. It's absurd, frankly. Especially when that requires rejecting Sakaki's statement out of hand. This is hardly a textbook demonstration of logic, Ilia. It's selective thinking."

"Selective thinking?"

Akane glanced at me, as if she expected me to explain.

"Confirmation Bias," I said, my mind doing a mad, frantic scramble to collect bits of half-remembered lectures. "In other words, accepting evidence and statements that fit your theory, and dismissing any that contradict it as exceptions or mistakes. You often see it," I glanced at Maki, "In experiments dealing with psychic powers. People naturally focus on evidence that they consider desirable, and overlook evidence that would prove them wrong. The final version of the story becomes one they find easier to understand, and preferable..."

141

"I don't follow," Ilia said. All that work I did remembering, and she didn't even let me finish. I deflated.

Akane sighed. "I mean, I know Ibuki and I didn't exactly get along..."

I remembered how vicious their argument the night before

had been. That was enough to make us all suspect her. This was probably a much bigger reason for Ilia's suspicions of Akane than any discussion of alibis.

I understood Ilia's feelings myself. If it weren't for Shinya's statement, I would have been equally willing to suspect Akane.

The crime itself appeared to be impossible. There were zero suspects. One victim, but no suspects. An unlikely set of circumstances. The only way to break this deadlock...

"We simply must cast doubt on Sakaki's statement," Ilia said, watching him closely. "If he isn't lying, then what? A mistake? A dream? There are other explanations."

"But I heard him talking," Hikari protested.

Ilia fixed her with a glare. "You and the others only heard his side of the conversation, yes? Only Sakaki actually heard Ibuki's voice. In which case..."

"But..." Shinya began, but could think of nothing to follow this.

"In which case, you have no choice but to suspect me. I can certainly see why you would think that way," Akane said, seeming very detached about it. Once again, she did not appear to be acting. Sonoyama Akane, one of the ER3 System's Seven Fools – perhaps this situation barely rated on her list of most stressful moments. "But you still have no proof, Ilia. You may own this island and this mansion, but without proof, do not treat me like a criminal. I don't care if you're not talking about the law, here. We are also not talking about a paperback mystery novel of dubious literary merit. You cannot declare I am the murderer with a slapdash application of selective thinking and the process of elimination. Nobody can do that."

"But Sonoyama, you cannot prove that you are not the murderer."

"Since when are suspects required to prove their innocence? Not being able to prove something unprovable is not proof of anything, Ilia. The burden of proof lies on the accuser, not the other way around."

"Again you speak of the law."

"Then what should we do?" Akane asked, shaking her head. "I am the prime suspect – so be it. I agree. I am the only one without an alibi before the earthquake. Nobody could have entered the studio after the earthquake. Perhaps you are absolutely right to doubt Sakaki's word. But in light of all of this...what are we to do?"

Yes.

That was the question.

"What shall we do?" Ilia looked around at the rest of us, not at all sure herself. She had not thought that far ahead, apparently.

Akane toyed with her bangs. "Turn me over to the police, if you like."

The police? Arresting one of the Seven Fools?

"I hate the police," Ilia said, as if the idea horrified her.

"There must be some other way..."

There followed yet another oppressive silence.

I leaned over and whispered in Kunagisa's ear. "Tomo..."

"What, Ii-chan?"

"Is there a way to end this witch trial?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes," Kunagisa looked up at me. "But I think you should be the one to say it."

"Oh," I nodded, and then raised my hand. Ilia looked at me in surprise.

"Yes? You there," she said. Thank god. I had been afraid

she would ignore me.

"I have a suggestion."

"What is it?"

"The room I've been sleeping in...I believe the lock on the door can only be opened from the outside. What if we put Akane there for safekeeping?"

"Safekeeping?" Akane said. "Sure you're not just locking me up?"

"Absolutely not. This is not a prison, not a punishment. Simply a separation. Ilia, what I fear most is this case leading to another murder. Kanami has been murdered? Fine, what's done is done. Not a nice way of putting it, but what happened there is over. Finished. But if someone else were to die...that would be bad. The easiest way of preventing that is to separate the primary suspect from the rest of us. If Akane is the killer, than nobody else will die. If someone else is the killer, someone who used some sort of trick to kill Kanami after the earthquake, then that person will be prevented from taking any further action. If they take further action, that will prove that Akane was innocent."

I stopped to gauge reactions.

"In other words, we block the killer, creating a situation where they can't afford to kill again. Regardless of who it is. All of this speculation about alibis and the possibility of an accomplice is ultimately pointless. A locked room? Locked rooms were made to be opened. There may be some trick to it, there might not be. Doesn't matter which. I don't give a damn about any of that. Akane might be the killer, someone else might be the killer, even I might be the killer – none of that changes anything. The best course of action we can take is to tie the killer's hands."

"I see. That makes sense," Yayoi said, somewhat to my surprise. "I understand your point. I would have to say I agree – at the least, I don't think we have much grounds to suspect

Sonoyama. Ilia's theory is...a bit too arbitrary."

Ilia did not appear to agree.

Yayoi continued anyway. "So perhaps this proposal is the right choice of action. But we can't keep her locked in there forever, you know. You can't be proposing we keep her in such a barbaric environment indefinitely?"

Apparently I was sleeping in a barbaric environment.

Fah! Bourgeois!

"No, just until the police get here. This island might be isolated, but it shouldn't take more than a day or two..."

"We will not call the police," Ilia snapped.

Um. Wait, did she really just say that? Jesus.

"Of course not. There is absolutely nothing to be gained from their involvement. They will simply assume that Sonoyama was the killer. They will do nothing at all."

I was less baffled by her actual words than what lay beneath them. What led her to spit, "They will do nothing," with such fierce countenance?

"But...we can't *not* call them. If we don't, the plan doesn't work."

"I disagree. While your plan is in effect, we continue to deduce the truth. If we discover the true killer, and inarguable proof of that fact, what else is there?"

"You plan to solve the case?"

Given the logic she had demonstrated so far, that was a worrying prospect.

But Ilia shook her head.

"Of course not. Have you forgotten? I mentioned it yesterday. In one week – only six days, now. The most talented mind is gracing us with a visit."

If this was a mystery novel, then this must be the detective. Ilia's favorite.

Ilia's hero.

"I am sure Aikawa will settle this matter within an inch of its life."

Within an inch of its life? Quite a turn of phrase. Ilia did not seem to think she was exaggerating.

"Six days," Akane said, cynically, unfolding her arms. "Very well. Fine. Whatever. I won't claim to consider myself suspicious, but if accepting this confinement improves the situation, then I have no choice. We can trust this Aikawa?"

"Absolutely," Ilia said, with the utmost confidence. With the confidence people only placed in the greatest of heroes.

Akane sighed. "Then lead the way," she said.

3

"Was this really the best choice?" I asked, toying with Kunagisa's hair. She claimed having her hair piled up on top was heavy, and insisted I change it. I'd thought it was cute, but if it made her uncomfortable, I wasn't about to leave it alone.

The meeting had broken up.

We were in her room.

"I think so. You said basically what I was thinking. Akane's probably grateful for it. It's a lot better than arguing forever, anyway."

"I'm not so sure..."

I found it hard to believe that Akane would be grateful for me for suggesting she should be imprisoned. Certainly, I felt kind of guilty about it. I didn't see another way out of it, but I felt like there must have been a better way, somewhere.

"All done."

"Thanks."

Kunagisa crawled over to her computers, and dragged herself into the chair. She turned them on, and her fingers began dancing over the keyboards.

"I just feel like I've done her wrong," I said.

"I can see why. But you did what needed to be done, Ii-chan."

After breakfast, Akane had calmly walked to the storeroom I'd been sleeping in. The maids would bring her meals there, and she could use the intercom to be let out if she needed to use the bathroom or shower.

The only thing she asked for was a lamp. She planned to spend the next six days reading.

148

Six days...objectively speaking, that room wasn't that bad. But there was no way to open the door from the inside, and the window was so high up you could never get out of it. In that sense, the room was a prison cell.

Six days.

That was a bit too long to spend trapped in a room.

"If only Ilia had called the police...or even if she hadn't. She intends to act like it never happened."

"But Ilia is right. If she had called the police, they would have treated Akane like a criminal, or at least kept her as a suspect. You wanted to avoid that yourself. You didn't want one of the Seven Fools arrested for murder."

"You know much about the ER3, Tomo?"

"I know a few people who are part of it. You know more than me."

"She might be one of the Seven Fools, but Akane doesn't have legal immunity."

"And truth be told, having the police here would be bad for me, too. Yayoi and Maki both have reputations, and would prefer to avoid dragging their names into this sort of scandal. Ilia's the same. None of us would have considered calling the police."

"I suppose..."

The world just didn't work the same way here. Even so, Ilia's reaction had seemed like there was more to it than that. Like she was absolutely against the idea of calling the police for anything.

"I wonder if Ilia had a bad experience with the police before?"

"You could always ask."

"I doubt she'd tell me."

"Probably not. Does it matter? Six days till Ilia's favorite gets here. Once Aikawa solves the case, we're free to go."

"Yeah..."

If Ilia refused to call the police, I could hardly do it myself. And with Akane locked up, there would be no more murders. But...

"Hey, Tomo..."

"What? Ii-chan."

"Do me a favor."

"Anything. What?"

"Can you do something about the locked room?"

"I'm not sure I can, but as a favor to you, I'll certainly try."

Yeah.

There was no reason for us to sit on our hands for six days. Since I'd proposed this solution, I felt obligated to try and solve the case.

"Mm," Kunagisa nodded. "If we solve the case, we won't need to keep Akane locked up. Regardless of whether she did it or not."

She spun her chair around to face me. Then she beckoned for me to come closer. I stood up and went over to her.

"I went ahead and typed up everyone's alibis."

Ibuki Kanami	Murdered
Sonoyama Akane	Before Earthquake: No After Earthquake: No
Kunagisa Tomo Maki, Shinya)	Before Earthquake: Yes (Ii-chan, Hikari, After Earthquake: No
Sashirono Yayoi	Before Earthquake: Yes (Ilia, Rei) After Earthquake: No
Chiga Akari	Before Earthquake: Maybe (Teruko) After Earthquake: No
Chiga Hikari Maki, Shinya	Before Earthquake: Yes (Ii-chan, Tomo, After Earthquake: No
Chiga Teruko	Before Earthquake: Maybe (Akari) After Earthquake: No
Sakaki Shinya Maki, Hikari)	Before Earthquake: Yes (Ii-chan, Tomo, After Earthquake: Yes (Maki)
Handa Rei	Before Earthquake: Yes (Ilia, Yayoi) After Earthquake: Maybe (Ilia)
Himena Maki Hikari, Shinya)	Before Earthquake: Yes (Ii-chan, Tomo, After Earthquake: Yes (Shinya)
Akagami Ilia	Before Earthquake: Yes (Rei, Yayoi) After Earthquake: Maybe (Rei)

"Questions?"

"Why maybe?"

"Like Akane said, family testimony is useless for alibis. Ilia, Rei, Akari, Hikari, and Teruko all qualify as family, really. Worth keeping track of, anyway. Not that alibis really matter much."

I had Kunagisa scroll back up, and read over the document

again.

"Let's dismiss the idea of an accomplice for now," I said. "Including any possible false alibis. With that in mind, we can definitely rule out Shinya and Maki. And Rei and Ilia."

Four people eliminated.

Leaving seven.

"If Shinya's statement is correct, then the paint lock becomes a problem. If he was lying, then Akane would have to be the killer."

"I don't see why he'd lie about it."

"Maybe he wasn't lying, just..."

No, no.

I was sounding like Ilia.

"I gotta admit, objectively speaking, Akane is the most suspicious."

"Anyone looking at this chart would agree. Looked at fairly or with a positive bias, there's only one person with no alibi at all. If that wasn't the case, she'd never have agreed to be locked in that room."

"True enough. Do you think she's the killer, Tomo?"

"I wouldn't say that. She's right; there is no proof. The process of elimination isn't enough. We haven't even done an autopsy on the body."

"So we're back to the locked room."

"Since the room was locked, nobody could have done it. Including Akane. You see any way past that, Ii-chan?"

"I might," I said. "If we think it through, we can figure it out. You have any ideas, Tomo?"

"Tons," Kunagisa said. "Need to boil them down a little. Oh, and one other thing, Ii-chan – I think we can safely say the crime happened after the earthquake, regardless of the accuracy of Shinya's testimony."

"Why is that?"

"The painting she did of you. Do you think she could have finished that painting before the earthquake? I seriously doubt it."

"Hmm..."

I was less sure. Kanami could work very fast indeed, but if she was right, then the locked room was a bigger problem than ever. It was hard to see that as good news.

"And then there's the headless corpse problem, Ii-chan."

Yeah. I nodded.

Whoever the killer really was...why had they cut off Kanami's head?

"Normally, with headless bodies, you have to look out for people switching places. In this case we can probably rule that out. There were twelve of us, and one beheaded, and there are eleven of us left. And all eleven of us are present and accounted for."

"Hnya. If one of the triplet maids had been killed, then mistaken identity could have been a big problem, but I doubt we need to worry about it with Kanami. If there was anyone else on the island, it would be a different story, but..."

"I think we can avoid anything like that. No need to worry if there was a 13th person here, or n number of other secret guests. If there was, trying to rule out suspects or poke holes in alibis would be a waste of time. Maybe when the detective arrives, there'll be time for that stuff, but for now we can concentrate on the surviving eleven."

"Yeah." Kunagisa looked up at the ceiling. "If we start considering accomplices and tricks to kill from a distance, then the only people we can rule out right now are you and me."

"I understand crossing yourself off, but why me?"

"I trust you," she said. "But a beheading! I can't see any reason to cut someone's head off unless you were going to switch

places with them. Well, maybe one or two. But the beheading wasn't the cause of death."

"Yeah. If it was, there would have been a lot more blood. A river of blood. Didn't look like she'd been stabbed or anything. Poisoned, or strangled, one of the two. Pure speculation, obviously."

"Was she easy to kill?"

"Probably. Kanami's legs were bad, and her eyes were better, but not great. If you snuck up on her, or even just walked right over to her, you could easily kill her. And it's not that hard to cut someone's head off, anyway."

As long as you didn't hesitate, you could be done in a minute or two. And I doubted this killer had hesitated. Just a hunch, but I was sure of it.

"No clue on the motive. Why did Kanami have to die?"

"There's no reason why anyone should have to die. But I agree. Shinya was the only person who'd ever met Kanami before they came here. Or maybe not. I suppose we shouldn't rule out the possibility of prior association."

"We'll keep it in mind."

No point in speculating without information.

"Okay," Kunagisa said. "Enough thinking. We can follow up on that stuff later."

"How?"

"Who do you think I am?" she grinned.

Oh. Right.

The blue haired girl was a hacker.

"Then let's check the scene of the crime," she said, producing a digital camera from somewhere.

4

We passed Yayoi on the way to Kanami's room. I almost called out to her, but something about her demeanor made the

words stick in my throat, and I missed my chance. A moment later she was around the corner. Apparently she'd walked right past us without ever noticing we were there.

"What's she up to?" Kunagisa wondered. "Never seen Yayoi look like that!"

"Something's bothering her...definitely seemed preoccupied with something, anyway."

"Hnya. Coming from that direction, she might have been looking at Kanami's room. Same as us, trying to solve the mystery so she can go home."

"I dunno about that. She's been here longer than anybody. I'm not sure she'd be trying to leave."

"Nothing like a murder to make you think about leaving places."

"Fair point."

The last thing Ilia had said before we left the dining room was, "Nobody leaves the island until Aikawa arrives six days from now. After all, each of us is a suspect – including me."

In other words, Akane was not the only one held prisoner. Kunagisa was hardly helping to solve the case out of curiosity. She simply wanted to go home as planned. For someone as incorrigibly lazy as she was, Kunagisa could be very particular about changes to her plans.

"Not that it matters either way. If Yayoi solves the mystery, that's absolutely fine with me."

"Didn't look like there was much hope of that. She seemed...depressed. Melancholy. I'd be more ready to believe she'd just been destroying evidence."

"I hope not," Kunagisa brandished her digital camera. "We'd better be quick, Ii-chan."

The door to Kanami's room had been left open. The door opened outwards, and we could see inside; there was no one in

there. Akane was in the storehouse, and the others must be occupied elsewhere. Not much point in speculating about their actions here. They were all doing what they thought best, I'm sure. As people did the world over, at all times.

The room still reeked of paint thinner, but the paint itself had mostly dried. Kanami's body lay in the same spot, unmoved.

"Hunh."

The idea of a headless corpse suddenly struck me as comical, somehow. The reason dead bodies were so creepy, the reason they provoked fear, was because the face had no expression. But when you removed the head that hosted that blank expression, the result was less unsettling than funny. Like you were looking at something that couldn't exist, or an unfinished model.

Kunagisa's coat still lay in the middle of the marbled river.

"How much was that coat?"

"Got two of them for around ten thousand, I think."

"Dollars?"

"Hnya, yen."

Actually sort of cheap. Surprising.

"Then let's go in."

But as I started through the door, Kunagisa grabbed my sleeve again, like she had that morning.

"What is it this time?"

"Try jumping."

"Mm?"

"Hnya. Just an experiment. See if you can vault the river with this short of a run up. You're not in bad shape, are you?"

"Not in particularly good shape, either."

"Try it."

"Okay."

I gave it a good shot, but as expected, failed to make it

across the river. I got a little more than halfway, and landed on my feet.

"So much for that."

"Hnyaaaaa," Kunagisa said. She didn't try jumping at all, just walked across the river to her coat, across her coat, and then across the rest of the river. "If you can't do it, the only person here who really stands a chance is Shinya. He's the only other male."

"Right, but if we're just talking physical strength, those maids are pretty strong. They carried your computers without batting an eye, and those can't exactly be light."

"But they're also tiny. Their stride is on the small side to begin with. I suppose adrenaline can help people push their limits – hard to tell what people are capable of, really. Anyway, how's Kanami doing?"

She moved closer to the body, lifting the digital camera.

While she busied herself with the corpse, I found myself staring at the canvases. There were a number of them; one of them appeared to be a redrawn version of the cherry trees sketch she'd torn up. I have to admit it gave me chills. I'd hardly consider myself interested in the arts, let alone a patron of them, but here with something so obviously valuable that I could hardly remain unaffected.

And then there was the portrait she'd done of me. Kanami had said she would give it to me, but I could never have accepted it. I didn't have it in me to stand the pressure it gave off.

"Which is, I suppose, nonsense."

I reached out for it, but stopped. I didn't want to leave fingerprints, but perhaps that wouldn't really matter.

Mm?

"Hey, Tomo."

"What?"

"Anything seem odd about this painting?"

"You mean the one of you? Hmm. What do you mean? Looks normal to me."

I had no idea how Kunagisa could describe a painting like this as normal, but that wasn't what was bugging me about it. There seemed to be something off about it, some tiny detail that was out of place. Nothing to do with the painting itself, just something about it that seemed wrong.

"Take a picture of it for me? Something's bothering me."

"Okay. Hmm...don't really see anything interesting on this end," she said, peering closely at Kanami's body.

I turned towards her. "Oh?" I said, coming closer.

"Hnnya. I'm hardly an expert. Don't know the cause of death, can't narrow down the time...you have to be a coroner to do that. Wish Ilia had summoned a genius doctor. 'Velcom, Dr. Jack!' etc. But without the head, it would be hard for anyone..."

"So we know nothing?"

"Hnya." Kunagisa lifted the body up. She never had been squeamish about touching corpses. "Heh, this is just like five years ago, Ii-chan. Same sort of thing."

"You'd think, but it doesn't feel the same to me. I'm all fidgety, like I'd never seen a body before."

I couldn't quite put a finger on this anxiety. It was like I'd found a scar on my body that I'd never noticed before.

"Jamais vu."

"What's that?"

"Opposite of *deja vu*. You know you've experienced something again and again, but it feels like the first time. Happens when your senses are paralyzed."

Then my senses had been paralyzed a long time ago.

I'd had any number of experiences like this overseas as well.

"Anyway," Kunagisa said. "There's definitely no stab

wound. So she was probably strangled. Maybe the killer cut off the head to hide the marks on her throat."

"Not sure that adds up, still. I mean, to cut off a head, you'd need a knife or an ax or a machete or something, but if you had something like that, then why not kill her with it?"

"Maybe they did. There's no stab wound on the body, but maybe they stabbed her in the head."

"Oh yeah," I said, "Where is the head? The killer took it with them? Where'd they put it?"

"Half the island is forest and mountains. Probably buried it somewhere. Or tossed it in the ocean. Didn't lack for options, anyway."

"Which brings us back to *why* they cut the head off in the first place."

Which was a dead end.

"One other question, Ii-chan. Look here – see? The head was cut off right where the neck meets the shoulders. Why'd they do that? Usually heads are cut off in the middle of the neck."

Now that she mentioned it, it was a bit weird. But not that big a deal, really.

I fell silent, folding my arms. Taking photos and investigating the scene was all well and good, but it looked like we were unlikely to figure anything out. All we'd really learned was that it was definitely not possible to jump across the paint river. And that was more a set back than progress.

Kunagisa went over to the intercom phone by the window, and picked it up.

"Mmm, this looks normal."

"Did you think there'd be something?"

"Hmm...you could send the signal to another room if you wanted. But I don't think anything like that happened here. Doesn't look like anyone tampered with it."

"Um...what was it again? When Shinya called here, what did Kanami say?"

"The paint fell over, and she was working, so he shouldn't interrupt. Hnya. If only Shinya had ignored her and gone to check anyway. Not to be mean, but he was her assistant. It's his job."

"You're right, but what's done is done."

I was sure Shinya planned to regret that for the rest of his life, anyway. No reason and no need for us to pile on. The world was never fair, and we all had to take responsibility for our own actions. Sometimes, we even had to do that for actions we had *not* taken.

"Is it possible they put the phone back the way it was afterwards?"

"Hmm. It's not *impossible*. But not really practical. Not like you can just plug it back in."

"Okay...then let's rule it out for now. Although that leaves us with a locked room."

"Do you think I'm lying?" Shinya said, behind us. I spun around, and saw him standing in the doorway, holding some sort of orange bag. "I heard her voice. I swear it was her."

He sounded pretty strung out. Understandably.

"I'm not saying you're lying. I don't see any need to doubt your word. But...Shinya, just supposing – hypothetically speaking – is there any chance it *wasn't* Kanami on the phone?"

"No," he said, instantly. "I've known her too long. Anyone else, maybe they could have been fooled, but not me. Do you...suspect me?"

"Not especially. Don't see that you had any reason to kill her."

"Do you know that? There might be more to me than you think." He mustered a sad sort of smile. He walked slowly across the dried paint. As he got closer, I worked out what the orange

bag in his hands was – it was a sleeping bag. "We can't just leave her like this," he explained. "Ilia approves. I'll bury her in the mountains out back. Since Ilia refuses to call the police, and this is her house...I can't exactly argue. Only thing I can do is give her a proper burial."

"We'll help."

Shinya started to argue, then realized the job would be easier with three of us, so let it drop.

Shinya and I picked Kanami's body up, and put it in the sleeping bag. It was cold to the touch. Of course it was.

"Do you have a shovel, Shinya?"

"There's one by the front door. Can you grab it as we go by, Kunagisa? Mm? Is that a camera?"

"Yep," she said. "Recording the scene of the crime. Might come in handy when the detective arrives. Dead people don't care if you take their pictures!"

That was a disturbing thought, but Shinya just raised his eyebrows.

"Shall we?"

"Um, Shinya...this painting..."

"Mm? Oh, right, Kanami's painting. It's beautiful...her last work. She meant to give it to you. Please, take it."

"Are you sure?"

"It's what she would have wanted."

Would have.

She was dead. The present tense no longer applied.

"Can you grab the legs? I'll take the head..." Shinya broke off, awkwardly. There was no head. He'd momentarily forgotten. I said nothing, just picked up the legs.

I'm sure Shinya wanted to bury her head with her body. But we had no idea where her head was. The killer might have hidden it somewhere, or maybe Kunagisa was right, and it was in

the sea or buried somewhere.

We lifted the body. Corpses are really heavy. Unconscious people, people that can't support their own weight, are always so much heavier than you expect. Either one of us could probably have managed, but it was definitely easier with two.

None of us spoke. We carried her out of the house, and around the back in silence. We dug the hole without a word.

Her body in a sleeping bag. An orange sleeping bag, far too cheap a coffin. Comically cheap. Perhaps all human death was comical, perhaps dying was nothing but a laugh.

Everyone died. I knew that well, sickeningly well, even Kunagisa knew that only too well. Shinya was a grown man, and must have encountered death before.

That was why none of us spoke.

At last he said, "Go on in without me. I want to stay with her a while."

I had nothing to say in response. I took Kunagisa's hand, and went back in side. Perhaps Shinya was going to cry. Perhaps not. But either way, we should not be there to watch.

We were only strangers, after all.

"Should we really have buried her?" Kunagisa said, a little too late.

"Why not? Shinya's the closest thing to family she has, he said. If he wants to bury her, then it's the right thing to do. We can't leave her in the studio for a week."

"Yeah. I know that."

"By the way, Tomo, what's the penalty for improper disposal of a body?"

"Maximum of three years. Plus additional charges as applicable. Sentence would be suspended, though. And we're both minors, so don't worry. I've got enough money to get us off the hook."

How vulgar.

Not that the question had exactly been refined.

"Nonsense," I muttered.

Kunagisa gave me a strange look.

Day 4 (2) - The 0.14 Tragedy

Sonoyama Akane

Genius – Seven Fools

What was it you wanted to do?

1

Hikari made lunch. Apparently, Yayoi wasn't feeling well, and was resting in her room. She had been quite pale when we passed her in the hall earlier.

"I know I can't cook like Yayoi does, but please enjoy," Hikari said, with an embarrassed smile. She left the room, leaving Kunagisa and me with Maki. Maki had already been eating. I ignored her with all my might, and began shoveling Hikari's food down my throat. Kunagisa wasn't hungry, and was just keeping me company. She was bored, and fidgeting.

"You there," Maki said. "Seems like you're having all kinds of fun, mm? Mm? Mm?"

"Is this what you meant?"

"Mm? By what?"

"I smell trouble brewing.' Your words, last night at dinner. Nice precognition, there."

"I sense you intend that sarcastically, but I'll take it as a compliment."

"If you could predict it, couldn't you have stopped it from happening?"

"Nope," she said, unperturbed. "All I can do is look and listen. You don't quite get how it works, do you? Extra sensory perception isn't all powerful. Like I said, it's like watching TV. Can you change what happens on TV?"

She smiled at me, and kept on eating.

She was a lot like Kunagisa, I thought. The way she was very young emotionally, but had a streak of something unnaturally mature that surfaced when you least expected. Here she was in the middle of a murder mystery, but she didn't seem to care at all. Was there anything that would make her care?

"Then tell us what you can about how this case will turn out."

"Sure. If you pay me," she said, suddenly scowling. She stood up, and stormed out of the room. Clearly, she was angry about something, but what?

"Hnya, Ii-chan, you're so oblivious."

"What?"

"I'm sure I don't know. When you're done eating, let's go back to my room. We have things to do."

"Mm, right."

Maki was just temperamental, I cheerily decided. I thought no more about it. I could not penetrate the darkness in the mind of someone who knew everything.

We went back to Kunagisa's room. She used a USB cable to transfer data from the digital camera to her computer. Then she started up her workstation, and put a floppy disc in the drive.

"What's on that disc?"

"Tools. Designed them myself. Can only be read on this workstation, so doesn't matter if I lose it. Let's get this done."

In other words, what Kunagisa was about to do was illegal.

She was going to investigate.

There were twelve people in the mansion – ten, if we excluded Kunagisa and myself. She was going to investigate all of our backgrounds, looking for points of contact.

Kanami had been murdered. There must have been a reason – reason enough to murder her. Of course, there were people who killed for no reason, but realistically speaking, people like that were incredibly rare...or perhaps people who killed for a reason were depressingly common. The guests here all claimed to be meeting for the first time, but perhaps that was a lie. Speculation could only get us so far.

Which was why Kunagisa Tomo had brought out the tricks she'd used when leading the Team's attack on the cyberground.

"What do they do?"

"First, access a high spec machine back in my apartment. This thing just can't handle it."

"Despite the terabytes?"

"Memory size is irrelevant, Ii-chan. You really don't know anything."

"Don't say that. I don't know as much as you, but I do know some things. I took computer science classes back in Houston."

"Really? Highly doubtful. I remember once asking you to copy a floppy disc and you went down to the convenience store with a ten yen coin in your hand."

"That was before I went to Houston."

This was the problem with people who had good memories.

"Whatever, Ii-chan. Then I'm bouncing off ten underground servers to contact Chee-kun."

"Chee-kun? That's a new name."

But he must be one of the Team. Kunagisa nodded.

"Chee-kun was mostly a seeker. If it's happening in the Milky Way, Chee-kun can find out about it."

Working on a galactic level?

Everyone in that group redefined large scale.

"He has a very bad personality, but he's a good guy."

"Hunh. Not the person who made your OS? That was Aa-chan, right...so who is Chee-kun, and what does he do?"

"He's in prison. Sentence runs another hundred and fifty years. Oh wait, plus eight years. 158 years. He kept going after the Team broke up. Hacked the United Nation's G8 database, got arrested. He almost pulled it off, but tripped the eighty-seventh

defensive line. You get to that level it becomes surprisingly easy to overlook really basic traps. Ah ha ha."

"You sure know a lot."

"Yeah. I set that trap."

I just looked at her.

"Heard Chee-kun was after UN top secrets. Couldn't allow that. Called up a few friends, and tried to stop him. It was still pretty close. Chee-kun's amazing."

"So that's why he's in prison? Will he really help? How's he gonna help in prison? They don't let him online, surely?"

"There's exceptions for everything. Chee-kun's a particularly special exception. But he'll help. He's not the type to fret the small stuff."

Kunagisa never stopped working all the while. I had absolutely no clue what she was doing.

"Why's he called Chee-kun?"

"He called himself Cheetah."

"Such a cheesy name."

"Yeah. He's really fast, apparently. Ran into a car once."

"Ran into it? Not run into by it?"

"Ran into it. Chee-kun's the first person in Japan to pay damages to the driver in a car/human collusion."

That certainly was eccentric.

Birds of a feather?

I could see Tomo getting along with birds.

"Don't ever introduce us."

Sounded like the type I preferred not to see up close.

"Don't worry," Kunagisa said. "We have rules about these things. No matter what happens, we never introduce friends. Friends are not information. That goes for you, too, Ii-chan. Never introduce me to anybody."

"Okay. Then I'll leave you to your work. Probably easier

to talk to him without me around, right? Got a few things I want to check out anyway."

Kunagisa gave me a salute.

I left the room, and went down the spiral staircase. I took a deep breath, and headed down the hall. I was going to Ilia's room. I'd asked Hikari earlier, and knew where it was.

Everything in the mansion was luxurious, but her door was definitely the fanciest. I wasn't convinced the sound would actually reach the inside if I knocked on it. I tried anyway, and apparently sound waves could penetrate it, since a voice inside said, "Come in."

I opened the door, and stepped inside. It was at least twice the size of Kunagisa's room. If Kunagisa's room felt like something from a movie, Ilia's room felt like I'd stepped into the movie. I had become Urashima Tarou.

I had been granted an audience.

The only word for it.

The head maid, Rei, was sitting on the sofa, and Ilia was standing beside it. They must have been talking.

Ilia shot me a quizzical look. "What is it, um..." and trailed off. Apparently she couldn't remember my name. Then again, I could not remember having told anyone here what it was.

"I was hoping to talk with you a little, Ilia."

"Very well. Please, sit."

I'd expected to have to talk her in to it, so this kinda took the wind out of my sails. I settled down on the sofa; it was even more luxurious than the one in Kunagisa's room, and felt like I was sitting on air.

"I was up all night, and I'm rather tired – I was about to retire. If we could make this brief..." she said, and began removing her dress. Making ready for bed. I saw Rei start to get up, but she ultimately said nothing – reluctant to take issue with

her employer's actions?

Wow. She really was a pure-bred blue blood. The gaze of the common man was of no concern at all. True nonsense.

"Ilia, why won't you call the police?"

Ilia stopped in her tracks. "I believe I explained that already. If we called the police, they would assume Sonoyama was the killer..."

"But how is that different from our current situation? We've already imprisoned her. Ilia, what we're doing is illegal."

"Accessory to murder, imprisonment, and improper disposal of a body," she said, returning her attention to her clothes. "So what? Crimes beyond killing and theft are meaningless. We're hardly imprisoning Sonoyama against her will. She consented to it. And it was your idea, remember."

This was true.

I could not disagree.

"The people I invite here matter to the world," Ilia continued. "I refuse to allow them to be fed on by the brutish authorities. No one enjoys being suspected of something they did not do. And..." she smiled. "No matter who the killer is, I have no intention of casting them to the mercy of the law. I will protect them with all the might of the Akagami Foundation."

"Why?"

"Geniuses are not equal under the law."

A declaration of intent. I saw no point in arguing further. I gathered she would not do the same if Shinya or I were the killer.

Not a pleasant feeling.

Indeed, it was a very unpleasant one.

"How do you define genius?" Ilia asked, abruptly.

I thought for a minute. "Kretschmer said that a genius is, '...a possessor of a special and peculiar intellectual apparatus: an instrument which, in a higher degree than others, is able to create

new values in life and happiness, all of which bear the purely personal stamp of his strange and unique individuality."

"I asked *your* opinion."

Exceedingly unpleasant.

Although I had to admit she was right. I thought a bit longer, and then said, "Great people, I guess."

"Yes," Ilia said. "That is exactly my opinion."

"But I can't help but feel like you have some other reason for not calling the police."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I simply said it. I meant nothing by it."

"Then you are finished here? I am very sleepy."

Well, that was unproductive. Like I'd taken part in a scripted debate. I bowed my head, and rose to leave.

Rei stood up, too. "I will walk you back."

"No need, Rei."

"No, it is my duty. Excuse me, Miss."

She walked with me out the door. Ilia had barely spoken to me before kicking me out, but I suppose this was good enough for a first attempt. It would take a Herculean effort to change that woman's mind about anything.

"Please don't take anything she says to heart," Rei said quietly. "She's never been very good at tact."

"Oh."

I don't think Rei had ever spoken to me before.

"I didn't plan on it."

"Truth is, she simply really admires Aikawa. That, I believe, is why she doesn't want to call the police."

"Aikawa? Oh, the one coming six days from now?"

"I'm sure Miss Ilia sees this as a welcoming present. Aikawa tends to enjoy this sort of incident...Miss Ilia had good reasons for the detective comparison."

Okay. So a murder mystery was a present for Aikawa. Not a present you'd prepare for just anyone.

Actually...

This case might well be the ideal cure for Ilia's boredom, too. Stuck on this island, a disinherited heiress, ample supplies of money and tedium. She gathered geniuses to amuse herself, and a mystery might well be the ideal...diversion?

I shook my head, dismissing the idea. It was going too far. People like that did not really exist. Should not really exist.

When we reached Kunagisa's door, Rei excused herself, and went back the way we had come. She seemed much nicer than I had imagined. Hikari had made her sound like a very demanding individual, but speaking with her directly gave me a very different impression.

This struck me as odd, and I was still puzzling at it as I opened the door. Kunagisa was still at her computer...and for some reason, the invincible fortune teller was here. Why?

Maki was smoking, but when she saw me come in, she put it out between her fingers. She got up and started to walk right past me without a word. But as she passed in front of me, she paused, bumped my chest with her head, and pushed me back out in the hall with it. She closed the door behind her.

I looked down at her, eyebrow raised.

She grinned up at me like a naughty child. Saying nothing.

"You feeling better?" I asked.

"My feelings aren't the only thing that's better. Heh heh heh. You are a careless one. Or maybe thoughtless?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Do you even have a favorite author?"

She was all over the place.

"Not really."

"Actor?"

"No."

"What a boring man. Say there's someone who has great respect for a genius. That someone can be one of three types. The first type genuinely likes the genius, admires them, looks up to them, wants to be like them, maybe even be them. Pure and simple. The second type is like the first, but has totally removed themselves from the picture – they would never put their own needs over those of the genius. And the final type? Well, they like the person so much they want to ride that person's greatness, and elevate themselves in the process. Their brains and minds are so rotten they define their very lives by the actions of another. Of the three types, which one are you?"

"...the second."

"Yes. A bit twisted, you may be, but you do have Kunagisa's interests at heart. I'm grateful for that much." Maki smirked. "But you have been pretty careless. Leaving Kunagisa alone in her room. If I'd turned out to be the killer, what then?"

I didn't know what to say.

"If you really value someone, never take your eyes often them. Remember that, my boy."

Pat pat.

She tapped my shoulder twice, and wandered off, singing.

Leaving me in the hall.

Damn it.

Swearing under my breath, I opened the door, and went in.

2

The standard rule remained in effect, so nearly all residents of the island assembled for dinner.

Nearly.

Of course, Kanami was not here; Akane was also absent, taking her meals in her prison cell. Akari and Teruko's chairs were also empty; the two of them were away to the mainland.

Apparently to contact the 'detective', Aikawa.

"You can't just call, or e-mail?"

"No," Hikari replied. "Aikawa is infamously hard to contact. Far too busy. Last we heard, Aikawa was in Aichi – so my sisters won't be back until tomorrow."

"Busy...what does Aikawa do, exactly?"

"Independent consultant."

How unspecific.

Did anyone really call themselves that?

Tonight's dinner was a Chinese buffet. According to the flavor genius Sashirono Yayoi, Chinese food took the least time and effort to cook. Presumably that was an opinion only someone as good as her would come up with, and not something a layman like myself would be able to reproduce.

"Tell me, Kunagisa," Ilia said, as we finished eating. "You were engaged in some furtive activities this afternoon, were you not? Did you figure anything out? I imagined you were too specialized in machines to take part in this sort of investigation."

"I do everything," Kunagisa said. She had sweet and sour sauce all over her mouth. "I can't be constrained by specialization."

That line reminded me of something...

Oh, right. Kanami's philosophy.

The words of an artist who had abandoned style.

We all had preferences and predilections, predispositions and propensities, but the E3 Program taught that this was no excuse for reducing oneself with dread specialization. The world's fondness for labels made that harder than it sounded. It was largely only possible if you had talent on the level of a Kunagisa Tomo, Ibuki Kanami, or Sonoyama Akane.

I never stood a chance.

"Tell us your findings, please. Did you solve the locked

room trick? Identify the killer?"

From her tone of voice, it sounded like Ilia was hoping Kunagisa had not solved a thing. Given what Rei had told me, this was probably the case. The last thing Ilia wanted is for anyone to solve the mystery before Aikawa got here.

"I understand everything. I understand so much that it's taking quite some time to figure out what to do."

Judging by the puzzled frowns, nobody understood what Kunagisa was trying to say.

After a long silence, Ilia decided to shift her attention from engineering to fortune telling.

"Himena, you've spent your time on this island mocking my other guests, but not once have you done any fortune telling. What do you say? Will you tell us what lies in our future?"

"It'll cost you."

The woman was living here for free, getting paid a regular salary, but demanding more fees on top of it that. How horribly greedy could anyone be? I'd never seen anyone this awful in all my life. She was the devil incarnate.

"I hardly deserve that," she said, glaring at me.

I didn't say anything!

"But I can hear it just as clearly. I make my living off my abilities. I'm well past the age when I do freebies out of some misguided sense of obligation. At least, I'm past that age mentally."

I knew what she meant, but she had enough money to buy Tokyo Dome ten times over, so what else could she possibly want? Could hardly hurt to perform the odd free divination.

"Think what you like."

Maki turned back to Ilia.

"I'd be happy to pay," Ilia said, clasping her hands.
"Please, proceed."

"It'll be over soon," Maki said, not changing her tone at all.

We all waited for her to continue, but she seemed far more interested in polishing off the Twice Cooked Pork. Apparently that was all she had to say.

"Is that it?" Ilia said, flummoxed. "I have to say..."

"That was free. A certain someone wouldn't shut up about it, so I tossed that one out there. Pay it no attention. It has little to do with the main gist of things."

Himena Maki.

What was it like to know everything, but say nothing? Since I knew nothing, I could not begin to imagine. You could really say that Maki was the most mysterious thing on this island. Even more than the paint river or the headless corpse.

She said nothing else the rest of dinner, and the evening meal of our fourth day on the island ended without further events of note. Kunagisa and Maki had both made slightly odd statements, just as they always did. That was all.

But there was one thing that caught my attention. All the time we ate, two people said not a word, and did not even seem to be listening to anyone around them. Shinya and Yayoi. They both simply sat in silence, moving food into their mouths. This was certainly understandable behavior, but it struck me as odd that Yayoi should be every bit as depressed by Kanami's death as Shinya. She had said she wasn't feeling well, but...

3

After nine that evening.

I was in Kunagisa's room, at a computer even my meager skills could sort of operate, looking over the digital camera data. It wasn't easy, since there was no mouse, but neither was it impossible.

Kanami's body. Whole body shots, close ups, detail shots

of the wound, the paint river. Kunagisa's coat floating in the center of the river. The paint had dried, and it was stuck there. We could probably peel it off if we tried, but it would still be covered in paint, ruined.

And...

The painting Kanami had done of me.

When I'd been investigating the scene with Kunagisa, something about it seemed odd.

Wrong.

Unnatural.

It was just a feeling, but...

"Oh. Oh...I see."

Well. That was so very simple. It was so simple it was hard to believe I hadn't noticed it before. An obvious, readily apparent difference.

"Hunh."

But that brought me to a new question.

How could this have happened? It seemed hardly possible. An artist of Kanami's caliber would never make such an obvious mistake.

While I was pondering the matter, there was a knock on the door.

"Christ."

I was sure it was Maki come to bug me again, and stood up. I was almost looking forward to it. But when I opened the door, it was Hikari. So much better than what I'd imagined that I was left gaping stupidly at her for several seconds before my brain caught up.

"Uh...hey, Hikari," I managed, at last. "Er...come in."

"Thank you," she said, bowing, and stepped inside. She looked around. "Um, is Tomo here?"

"Kunagisa? I bound her hand and foot and tossed her in

the bath."

"Eh?"

"She's like a cat. Hates the bath. Her hair is naturally a much lighter shade of blue, you know. But she never washes it, and it usually looks darker. But she's not much of an escape artist, and once she gets wet, she gives up and always winds up taking a very long soak."

"Hunh...she's rather like a Russian Blue, isn't she?" Hikari said, whatever that meant. I really had no idea. I let it pass.

"Um. So. If you need to talk to her, it'll have to wait," I said. Then it occurred to me that this might be my chance. "Do you have time now, Hikari?"

"Mm? Well, yes...I've finished work for the day."

"Then do you mind waiting here? I don't want to leave Kunagisa alone." Maki's warning earlier had resonated. "Which is why we have Akane secured, so I doubt she's in any real danger, but just in case, can you watch her?"

"I'm sure I don't mind," she said, flustered. "But are you sure you want to leave me with her?"

"I doubt anyone would attack when there's two of you here."

"That's not what I meant."

Oh, that.

"Not a problem," I said. "Maki, maybe. But I trust you."

And with that, I thanked her, closed the door behind me, and headed down the hall. I went downstairs to the first floor.

"Yeesh," I muttered, wincing. "'I trust you.'"

When had I become capable of using a word like that?

Q: What does 'trust' mean?

A: You don't mind being betrayed.

You won't regret it when you are.

"Nonsense either way."

I reached my destination – the door of my old room. Sonoyama Akane's prison.

I knocked. "It's me," I said.

There was a long silence. "Oh?" she said at last. She sounded surprisingly relaxed. "What brings you here? I thought you'd be sticking close to Kunagisa. You surprise me."

"Well...there was some hesitation. But I wanted to apologize to you."

"Why on earth would you do that?" the muffled voice sounded cross. "You protected me. Apologizing for that makes it seem like you think I'm too dense to figure that out. It's insulting. I should be thanking you. That's all."

"....."

"I could have suggested it myself. But I figured that was a bad idea. When you suggested it for me, I was grateful. I should put that gratitude in words."

There was a brief silence.

"Thank you."

"...you're welcome."

This was why she'd managed to climb to the top of ER3. You didn't become one of the Seven Fools by being smart, or by hitting the books. It just didn't work that way.

"When Hikari brought dinner, she told me you've been poking around. You and Kunagisa. Can you tell me what you've found out?"

"I don't know the killer yet."

"*You* don't? Hmm. That sounds significant. I like weighted statements like that. Okay, so let me change the question. How goes your thoughts on the locked room?"

"What do you make of it, Akane?"

"It's a post hoc fallacy."

"Is that even English?"

"Latin. I dunno the Japanese. Like blaming the rooster for the sunrise."

Oh...

I sighed.

Okay. She'd already cracked the locked room. And despite this, she'd agreed to be locked up here – just to prevent anything else happening. She really was an amazing individual.

Akane chuckled.

"Ilia's favorite...Aikawa, was it? Maintaining the status quo till he gets here seemed like the best plan. Not like it's that hard on me, either. I spent most of my youth reading in tiny rooms like this. In fact, this room's quite a bit bigger than most of those."

"Do you know who the killer is, too?"

"That, I don't know. Really! No lie. Hardly my field. I've read a few mystery novels, but just for fun, you know? ...you ever read Mushakoji Saneatsu?"

I wasn't sure where she was going this. Had Mushakoji Saneatsu even written mystery novels? Confused, I answered, "Yeah...extracts, at the least."

"Then you know *Shinri Sensei* – the Teacher of Truth?"

That much, sure.

"I used to think you were supposed to read the title *Mari-sensei*, and was very irritated by how arrogant the woman was. Not that I'm one to talk! Anyway, early in the book, the teacher of truth talks about why it's bad to kill people. You remember it?"

"Yes... 'Would you ever agree to let someone kill you? What conditions would make your murder acceptable? Please, tell me. If you would never consent to your murder, then surely it is never permissible to kill another.'"

I might have a bad memory, but even I remembered that much.

"Right," Akane said. "So let me ask you that same question. Would you ever agree to let someone kill you?"

"No."

"If it were a choice between your life or Kunagisa's, what would you do?"

"I don't want to think about it."

"Of course not," Akane cackled. "That's the way you are, right? You despise having to choose. You do not accept that you have to make a choice. Himena said something similar yesterday, but she really hit the nail on the head, didn't she? You just let yourself drift. Avoiding conflict. Never clarifying anything. You're an ambiguiist."

"I don't deny it."

"You don't deny it, but you won't admit it either. You only agreed to play shogi with me because you *knew* you would lose. If there's any chance of victory, you never agree to compete."

I didn't hate losing; I hated trying not to.

Hated any form of conflict.

Didn't make friends so I could avoid ever fighting with them.

"You hate people?"

"Not really."

"Do you like them?"

"That's certainly not true."

"Right. The base line for your value system is the belief that people are better off alone. Belief...or desire. The desire to make that notion true defines you. You do your best not to get involved, not to hurt others. You might be willing to take part in something happy, or something fun, but you have no intention of sticking around for suffering or grief."

I thought couples that fought all the time but stayed together were idiots.

Why didn't they just get along?

They could easily do that.

Or maybe they couldn't.

"When did you become a psychologist, Akane?"

"I am a pan-discipline academic. Such trivial distinctions of field are of no use to me. Heh heh. All hyperbole aside, you really do prefer to be alone."

"Well, yeah. I'm my oldest friend."

"That's true for me or anyone. The self is the best friend any of us will ever have. So what does that make Kunagisa? You've known her less than a year – a year with a gap in the middle, but still."

"....."

"Are you in love with her?"

No beating around the bush there.

I'd been asked the same question, five years ago.

By Kunagisa's older brother.

But...

The answer was the same.

"No. Nothing like that."

My voice – depressingly cold.

It was hard to believe it really belonged to me.

Why?

Why was I...

...like this?

"Hmph. Okay," Akane said, a little thrown. "But Kunagisa loves you. I'm sure of that."

"Probably. She's said as much."

"I'm not in the habit of talking about this sort of thing, but have you ever stopped to wonder why there are so many couples? So many people in relationships?"

"....."

"Doesn't it strike you as odd? Logically speaking, the odds of someone you like liking you back aren't exactly great. Life isn't like shojo manga. Yet in reality, the majority of people find someone. Why do you think that is?"

"I think nothing of it. I've never considered it. Just happenstance, I suppose. The law of large numbers."

"Nope. Coincidence is not a factor here. This is my theory – someone says they love you. That makes you really happy. Just being told, 'I love you,' is enough to make people start to fall in love."

Akane sounded pretty sure of herself. I could almost see her grinning triumphantly. It was getting harder and harder for me to continue this conversation. It was crushing me, squishing me beneath its weight.

"So what?"

"Well. That leads me to wonder why it is you don't fall for Kunagisa. I'm an academic. Don't like not understanding things."

"She likes everyone. Genuinely likes everyone. There's no reason why it needs to be me by her side."

I could barely get the words out.

"Ah ha," Akane said. "You don't want Kunagisa to love you. That's not what you're after. You want her to *choose* you. You and you alone."

"....."

I could not...

...deny it.

"Hmm. But why Kunagisa? That's what I don't understand. Yet I feel like there must be a reason, somewhere. Even with Kunagisa, there must be unpleasant moments. In fact, I'd guess her schmaltzy side rubs you the wrong way."

Schmaltzy?

Who were we talking about?

"You mean ditzy?"

"Yeah. Men like you normally can't abide girls like that – girls that are superior to you, but less mature."

"I enjoy being with her. No, that's not right..." I had to choose my words carefully. "That's not right. I enjoy being next to her."

The place I liked best...

...was at Kunagisa's side.

I'd come back to Japan...

...to sit next to her.

"Hmm," Akane grunted. "Then you're a bit of a masochist."

"I was bullied in elementary school. I certainly lean that way."

"You were bullied? That's not right. You were ostracized. Rejection and abuse are not the same thing. Children torture liars and the weak, and avoid those that don't fit in. But I know how you felt. In high school I often wondered if my classmates were all aliens. These people took tests to get an *average* score, not a perfect one. They ran marathons *together*. They graded tests on a *curve*. Equality, for better or worse. Just round π down to three. Seemed like the other six Fools had similar experiences. The .14 tragedy. The more everyone is equal, the more ostracized those who still can't fit in become. Genius is born from ostracism. But not all who are ostracized becomes geniuses."

"It's a necessary condition, but not a defining one. I'm certainly not one."

"Thou art no genius, mm? Perhaps. ...I believe you're intelligent enough to grasp the difference between a warning and coercion, so let me offer a kindly warning. If you want Kunagisa to choose you, I suggest jumping her bones. That'll make you her one and only. I'm sure she won't resist. You may be an introverted

gloomy little twisted ingrate oblivious to adolescent rebellion and hormones, but you've still got it in you to do that much."

"I really don't."

"Puss."

Who?

Chee-kun?

"Um...I'm really not sure of this one, but...wuss?"

"Oh, right, sorry. Heh heh. I'm starting to like you. Shame you aren't a woman."

What did that have to do with anything?

I couldn't figure out what she was trying to say. No...she'd simply hit me where it hurt too many times, and my mind was frayed.

At this rate...

"Doesn't matter. Either way...either way, the answer will come to light soon enough. We shall leave things in the capable hands of time. So. I mentioned shogi a moment ago...have you heard the theory that in zero-sum games like shogi and chess, there is always an ideal play?"

"Game theory...like the Prisoner's dilemma?"

"Exactly. There is a mathematically finite number of ways for the shogi pieces to move. Therefore, there must logically be a best move. Carried to an extreme, the game is decided the first time a piece is moved. But of course, this theory requires both players to play flawlessly, or everything falls apart. So...in our situation, what will the killer do? How will Aikawa react? I can't wait to find out. Although this case is no shogi board – more of a maze, really."

"A labyrinth? Those are simply enough. Keep on hand on a wall, and you'll reach the exit. Eventually."

"Only in a very simple labyrinth. You can't do that if the maze is sub-divided, or contains loops. I think this case is the

latter. Naturally, even those mazes have a solution...but it's hard to explain aloud. Look it up later. But...doesn't it sound good? A game with no guaranteed way to win?"

A game with no sure path to victory.

No easy way to win.

Was...

Was this case like that?

Worrying.

It felt like the ground beneath my feet was shaking.

I felt...

...sick.

"Now that I think of it..."

Akane was talking again.

This sickening conversation was still going on.

Even though it was making me sick.

"Um, Akane."

I...

...couldn't keep going.

"I'd love to stand and chat all day, but I've got someone waiting for me."

Forcing the words out.

Trying not to throw up.

"I'd really better be going."

"Oh, okay. Sorry," Akane said.

I had not expected her to give in so easily.

"Please, come again. You help keep boredom at bay."

"Thanks, I guess. Then..." I took a step down the hall, but one last thing popped into my head, and knocked on the door again. "Back to the first question..."

"Mm? What?"

"What about you, Akane? Would you ever be willing to let someone kill you? Even for a moment?"

"A moment? Ha! I always am," Akane declared. "'When it is time to die, then it is good to die.' I, Sonoyama Akane, have no complaints, no matter when, where, how, or who by I shall be murdered."

I went back to my room, never suspecting that this would be the last time I spoke to Sonoyama Akane, the pan-discipline academic, one of the ER3 System's Seven Fools, the most famous female academic ever to come out of Japan, the genius's genius.

4

"Welcome back, Ii-chan."

Kunagisa was sitting on her bed, wrapped in a white bathrobe. Hikari was on the sofa. She looked relieved to see me come in. Kunagisa was always really hyper after a bath, and it had taken me a while to figure out how to handle her. I knew just how Hikari felt.

"Ii-chan! I washed my hair, see! Praise me, praise me!"

"Looks cute."

Kunagisa's hair had become a beautifully deep cobalt blue. The color it really was. She had explained that having recessive genes was hard.

"You should hop in next. Might have some good ideas in there. Like Archimedes! Then you can run around the mansion naked."

"I'd...rather he didn't," Hikari said, earnestly. As if there was a real chance I would. I wouldn't have thought I seemed like the type. "Come to think of it, Archimedes was a very strange man. Are all geniuses that way?"

She then became lost in thought. Was she thinking about anyone in particular? I couldn't be sure.

"At the time, it was perfectly normal to exercise naked, Hikari. Archimedes was not considered particularly odd."

"Hnya. How erudite, Ii-chan."

"More like rudimentary. What brought you here, Hikari?"

"Oh, right. Miss Ilia sent me. She asked me to check up on you and Tomo."

Such an honest woman. That was the sort of thing you really had to keep secret, but when I pointed that out, she just laughed, embarrassed.

"Probably. Akari's better at this sort of thing than me, but she's away for the evening. She'll be back early tomorrow."

"They went to summon the detective?" I was curious, so I asked, "What's this Aikawa like? You sound like you've met..."

"Yes, we did. During...a different incident."

She trailed off. I got the impression she wasn't trying to keep secrets, but that it wasn't something she felt comfortable talking about, either.

"An incident? On this island?"

"Yes. Just after Miss Ilia was exiled here. Before we began the salon. We called Aikawa, and before we knew it, the case was solved." Hikari paused to think for a moment. "I'm not sure how to describe Aikawa...a very volatile person. Sarcastic, impulsive, combative. Solved the mystery on a wave of anger."

"Hunh."

Hikari seemed to be struggling to find the right words, but wasn't being very successful. I had no clearer idea than I'd started with.

"So...temperamental?"

"Temperamental? More like, 'always angry.' Even smiling. Like the smiles are hostile. I'm sorry, I'm not making sense. Basically...Aikawa refuses to forgive the world."

"I see," I said, not seeing at all. "In the novels I've read, the detective is always cool and collected. You could replace eighty percent of their dialogue with, 'Are you stupid?' and the

conversations would still make sense. But from what you say, Aikawa's more a hot-blooded hero type. Crime must pay!"

"Well, not exactly, no. All that anger isn't directed at criminals...Aikawa's angry at the world. Like, 'This world, humans...you should have been *great*. Get with the program already!' That sort of thing."

That was volatile. Not a type you saw often these days. The exact opposite of an ambiguist master of nonsense like me.

"Angry at the world, so always in a bad mood, but hates being angry because of a bunch of failures. Hence the sarcastic grin. I suppose. Nothing like you or Tomo, certainly."

When Hikari spoke of this detective, she seemed more than a little happy. Like she was bragging about a friend. No, not friend...more of a hero. Just like Ilia had.

"I said...well, someone like that is better than us, really," I said. "We can rely on him, then?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"That's good to hear. Even if we fail to solve the case in the next six days, Aikawa will."

"...you don't sound very confident."

"Merely cautious. Or timid. Honestly? I just don't really care."

"You don't...care?" Hikari frowned. "Why is it...maybe this isn't something I should say, but how can everyone be so calm about this?"

"Another blunt question."

"Sorry. But...someone died. Murdered. How can you...?"

"We're used to it."

At least, I was.

Or maybe I was just numb. I wasn't really sure what the difference was.

"Hnya. But Shinya and Yayoi both reacted normally."

"Right. And in that sense, you and the other maids are pretty calm yourselves. Same as us."

"We've been trained," she said, sounding forlorn.

Her twenty seven years had not all been smooth sailing, apparently.

"Oh, right," she said, breaking the awkward silence with a clap of her hands. "Miss Ilia had something she absolutely wanted me to ask you. The locked room trick. You said something vague about understanding too much to understand, but...Tomo, you know the answer, don't you?"

The locked room trick.

The river of paint.

Hmm.

Ilia might be unversed in the ways of the world, but she was hardly an idiot.

"We're not trying to be coy. It's a simple trick; anyone who reads enough mystery novels would see right through it. But when you see it for real, it's a different story. The smell of blood, the presence of death...it drowns you."

"Ha ha, Ii-chan, such purple prose!"

Kunagisa laughed.

Like an innocent, defenseless child.

.....

This derailed my train of thought.

Did I...

...want her...

...to choose me...?

When I said nothing else, Hikari gave me a strange look, and then turned to Kunagisa. "So, Tomo, if you do understand, than could you tell me?"

"Mm, sure. It took some time to wring things down, but I've figured it out now." Kunagisa nodded. "Hmm...where should

I start?"

"Um, before you do...maybe this isn't important, but what do you mean you understand too much to understand?"

"The difference between bottom up and top down," I said, pretty sure Kunagisa would never be able to explain it coherently. "For example, Hikari – imagine this table is a sandbox, and you wanted to make the tallest mound of sand you could. What would you do?"

"...take sand from the sides, and pile it in the center."

"Right. So would I. But Kunagisa would not. She would dump a big pile of sand in the center of the table. The final mound would look the same as ours. But ours is gradually assembled, bit by bit. Kunagisa would take a lot and gradually peel it away till she had the right shape. That's just how her mind works. Right, Tomo?"

"Your metaphor's *confusing*."

That left me without a leg to stand on.

But apparently Hikari had grasped the general gist. She was nodding studiously.

"Okay, so if you do understand, then what was the trick, Tomo?"

"Rokay. But only if you answer my question in return."

Hikari blinked. She didn't quite grasp what Kunagisa had just said, but Kunagisa was not in the least bothered, and hopped down from the bed, heading for her computers. She stood next to the one I'd been using, and pointed at the screen.

"First, let us review the scene! Tah-dah! The studio!"

Kunagisa opened a wide shot of the scene in an image viewer program. The marbled river Styx, and the headless corpse on the far side. Photos of what we had all seen in the flesh that morning. Kunagisa showed no consideration for that at all.

"The first problem...is this paint. The earthquake happened

at one, the shelves toppled over, and this is the result. That much was obvious! The river is too wide to jump across. None of us could ever vault the thing. If Kanami was murdered after the earthquake, how did the killer get in and out? At the least, we need to figure out how they left the scene. You follow me so far?"

"Yes, that much I knew."

"Now, if the killer was the yokai Long Arms, Long Legs, this case would be solved, but any answer that easy is obviously a lie."

Hikari smiled weakly. Maybe she'd never heard of Long Arms, Long Legs, but even if she had, the smile was appropriate. It made no difference, either way.

"Then the natural conclusion is that the murder must have happened before the earthquake. That makes it easy to get and out. No footprints, nothing blocking access to the studio. And since only one person – Akane – has no alibi before the earthquake she starts looking totally suspicious...except for Shinya's testimony. Shinya spoke to Kanami on the phone after the earthquake. Therefore, Kanami must have been alive for at least a few minutes after the earthquake. Where does that leave us, Hikari?"

"I have no idea," Hikari said, tilting her head. How adorable. "The window maybe? I can't think of any other way in. But it was locked, wasn't it?"

"The window. A possibility. Glass is functionally more liquid than it is solid, and you'd be right to not put much stock in the lock there. We could also bring quantum tunneling into the picture."

No. We couldn't.

"But surely you must have noticed by now, Hikari?"

"I really haven't."

"It's a post hoc fallacy, Hikari," I said. It was fun watching

her be confused, but I was starting to pity her.

Kunagisa nodded.

"Post hoc ergo propter hoc. The confusion of correlation and causation. A classic logical mistake. Suppositions, my dear. Suppositions. The world simply does not support them."

"I don't speak Latin..."

"But you knew it was Latin."

"Well, I know the word ergo."

Hikari was more on the ball than previously suspected.

"For example, Hikari – here is a hundred yen coin. I predict that it will be heads. Then I flip the coin, like so. And sure enough...heads. What do you think? Obviously, it's a coincidence. Normally. But some people might draw the wrong conclusion. They would assume the coin was heads *because* I said it would be. That would imagine me to have psychic powers."

In actual fact, Kunagisa used a double headed coin. Just in case.

"You got drunk, and your cold got better – oh! Booze can cure colds. You turned on your computer and the phone rang? Ah ha. Turning on the computer makes the phone ring! A man looks at a woman, just as she turns to look at him. She must be in love with him! The catfish were jumping, and there was an earthquake! Catfish cause earthquakes! And so on. In other words, Hikari, because B happened after A does not mean that A caused B. The two events happened in sequence, but are not necessarily related. In this particular situation, there was an earthquake...and a river of paint. *Are they actually related?*"

"Oh."

You could see it fall into place.

"You mean...the earthquake *didn't* knock the paint over?"
Hikari asked.

"Hnya. The shelves probably did fall over. Maybe spilled

a little paint. Kanami said as much on the phone. But I doubt the spill was anything like as large as the river. The paint cans were scattered, and a few of them spilled, but that was all. Paint can lids don't come off that easily, so it's a bit weird that an earthquake would open every single can. But even a little paint might be enough to trap someone in a wheelchair inside the studio."

"Okay, I think I get the rest," Hikari said. "I'm impressed. So the killer came in after the earthquake, and murdered Ibuki. Then, on their way out, they deliberately made the spill larger. Carefully, so as not to leave any footprints. It wouldn't be that hard to make it look natural."

Hikari looked as if she could almost see the killer walking backwards, pouring paint on the floor.

We had all just assumed the paint river was caused by the earthquake, and made our deductions based on that supposition. But it did not take a genuine earthquake or a genius artist to create that river – anyone could do it.

It was hardly a work of art.

And could be created in a few short minutes.

"But why would the killer—?"

"To make us think the murder happened before the earthquake," I said. "The killer probably didn't know that Shinya had spoken to Kanami on the phone. They thought the paint river would mean we would naturally conclude that the crime had happened before the earthquake. Or make it look like they were trying to lead us in that direction."

"So, then..."

"Right. Either way," I clapped my hands together, and spread them wide. "We've got a lot more suspects."

Only four people had an alibi after the earthquake. Ilia and Rei, Maki and Shinya. There was no longer any reason to remove

the remaining seven from the list.

"Then there's no reason to keep Akane locked up, is there?" Hikari asked, happily. "She's no longer the only suspect, so..."

Apparently she was really uncomfortable with the idea of confining a guest. She was simply not the kind of person who could lead a calculated life.

By contrast, Sonoyama Akane was a rational number. I explained this to Hikari.

"Akane already figured out the locked room trick. And she pretended not to."

"Why?" Hikari said, utterly baffled. "That makes no sense. Why would she do that?"

"To keep things from escalating. She's very, very smart."

No reluctance to put herself at a disadvantage for the greater good. It went against the definition of a human, but was unmistakably admirable.

"Then we should probably keep this secret."

"Probably. We still don't know who the killer is, so I think confusing the situation is risky. Ilia has a right to know, so feel free to do as you like, Hikari."

I had no intention of interfering there.

"I dunno," Hikari said, not satisfied. "The fact that the earthquake didn't cause the paint river is so...so simple that it's hard to accept."

"Yeah, there's a part of me going, 'Wait...' as well. But most tricks are like that, once you see through them. I've seen far worse tricks in my time; this is actually on the clever side." Hikari seemed so disappointed that I found myself defending the killer. "Tricks are inherently disposable."

"But...could someone really think up a trick like this on the fly?" Hikari asked. "They couldn't know there was going to be

an earthquake. It all seems like a really big coincidence. The world doesn't work that way."

"The law of large numbers, Hikari!" Kunagisa crowed.

"What *is* that?" Hikari asked. "Large numbers?"

"Mm. Things that look like amazing coincidences aren't really that big a deal if you actually examine them closely. For example, if you won the lottery, you'd be really surprised, right? You have better odds of getting hit by a meteor. But if you think about it, those odds are only true if you only buy one ticket. Not many people buy only one lottery ticket, and never buy another one. If you put 23 people in the same room, the odds that two of them were born on the same day of the month is fifty percent. But if you were one of those two, you'd think it was an amazing coincidence, right? This sort of thing is called the Law of Large Numbers. It was pure chance that an earthquake happened today, but it could have happened tomorrow too. And they probably had plans that didn't involve earthquakes. I'm sure the killer spent a lot of time thinking up different plans. As people do."

"We just can't tell that from looking at the outcome alone...?"

"Pretty much. Another post hoc fallacy," Kunagisa said, then thrust her index finger in Hikari's direction. "Now then, Hikari! My turn to ask a question!"

"Uh, oh, right. I promised," Hikari said, straightening up. "Go ahead, ask away."

"Why is Ilia here?"

The air in the room changed instantly.

Here.

On this island.

Wet Wing Raven Island.

Why was Akagami Ilia here?

Hikari's pleasant smile flicked off. She froze to her chair,

not moving a muscle. The question didn't surprise her, it didn't confuse her...it terrified her.

Was it that bad?

"Um. Well..." she spluttered, her voice shaking.
"I...well...um..."

"You won't answer, Hikari?"

"I can't...not that. Sorry, Tomo," Hikari said, hanging her head. Almost collapsing. "I'll answer anything but that."

It was painful to see. Like we were demons proposing something immoral. In exchange for her soul. In exchange for the thing most precious to her. The worst kind of nonsense.

"Never mind, then," I said, stepping in. "Tomo, drop it, okay?"

"Okay, Ii-chan. Not much else I can do."

Even Kunagisa, selfish Kunagisa, was willing to back off this one.

"Sorry, Hikari."

"No, I mean...you answered all my questions, and I..."

She stood up, bowed, and took a few steps towards the door. Then she stopped, and turned around. "One more thing," she said. Like Columbo. Only much less sinister, since she was an adorable maid. "This isn't from Miss Ilia or anything, just my curiosity speaking...do you believe Himena is really psychic?"

Did we believe...?

...in Maki's ESP.

The psychic who knew everything.

I thought for a moment. "Other than common sense, I have no reason to doubt her word."

205

Kunagisa said the same thing she had the day before.
"Whether they exist or not, it doesn't bother me."

"Oh...well, that's true enough."

Hikari nodded, and left the room. I stared at the door for a while, remembering how flustered she'd been when we asked about Ilia.

"...ah, well."

It was unlikely to have anything to do with this case. I didn't see any link between why Ilia was exiled and Kanami's death. I turned back to Kunagisa. Just as I did, her work station made a strange noise, and her hands leapt to the keyboard.

"What is it?"

"E-mail. From Chee-kun. He works fast! They say he ignores the Theory of Relativity the way the rest of us do traffic signals."

She's sent the request around noon, so this was certainly quick work. Especially for someone serving time.

"Heh...Himena's real name is Himena Shinari. Shock! Especially since it's a better name. Why's she using a stage name?"

"Maki's real name? Why'd this Chee-kun bother finding that out?"

"Hnya. He was supposed to be looking for links between everyone. Really not the nicest guy. Will have to start his training over someday. He has no idea how to act around people. But...look, Ii-chan. A connection."

I looked, but it was in English, and I couldn't read it.

"Why can't you read English, Ii-chan? Where did you study abroad again? The South Pole? Mars!?"

"I forgot it. Three, four months without using something...how am I supposed to remember it? And I could speak it a little, but I never was much good at reading it."

"The selection exam for the ER Program has mandatory English, Chinese and Russian sections. How did you even get in? Bribes!?"

"I remembered it then."

"Very suspicious. Okay, I'll translate. 'Ibuki Kanami and Sonoyama Akane ate together at a cafe in Chicago.' About six months ago. With witnesses. Why would they eat together? Didn't they hate each other?"

"They ate together..."

.....

We'd been right. There was a connection. But why Akane and Kanami? Akane had mostly operated in the States, and Kanami was a world-class painter, so it wasn't out of the question for them both to be in Chicago, but they didn't seem like a pair that would bump into each other and decide to have dinner.

"Mm. And this was no random meal. They were at a secret club!"

"A...secret club?"

That sounded very suspicious.

"Yeah," Kunagisa nodded. "But they exist. Even in Japan. Places like that...for politicians and celebrities, famous people or their children. Perhaps 'exclusive' is better than 'secret.' They have very strict security."

Then I had better not ask how Chee-kun got this information. There were things in this world that were better off not mentioned.

"You're sure of it?"

"Chee-kun never lies. But he sometimes omits the truth. Much like you, Ii-chan."

"Hmm. But I lie all the time."

Be that as it may.

Sonoyama Akane and Ibuki Kanami were connected.

Regardless of how important that turned out to be, it was certainly interesting. I'd have to ask Akane about it tomorrow, I thought. Unaware that this was would never happen.

"Lot of other updates here...Na-chan never changes. Sa-chan's not doing well. Hii-chan's...missing. Not surprising. The commodore got a job? Good one, too. Aa-chan is...golly. Everyone else doing well. Chee-kun himself doing fine. Good to know. I did feel a little guilty."

Kunagisa was deep in a past I had not been part of. Feeling left out, I laid down on the sofa. With Akane in the store room, I was left without a bedroom. I was crashing on Kunagisa's sofa for the time being.

Kunagisa finished reading her e-mail, and turned off the workstation. She got off the chair, and dove onto her bed. Then she sat up on her knees, and said, "Ii-chan, let's sleep together!"

"No."

"Nights are still cold. You'll get sick sleeping there! This bed's king size, plenty of room."

"No."

"I promise I won't do anything! Just sleeping. Nothing else. Not even touching. Back to back! Come on!"

"No."

"Please. I'm so lonely."

...damn her.

She was really insistent.

I sat up, and looked her in the eye.

"You promise not to do anything."

"Mm."

"Promise? I'm trusting you here."

She nodded happily. "I'll never betray you!"

So that night I slept on a bed for the first time in a very, very, very long time. I didn't really expect her to, but Kunagisa really did keep her promise. I could hear her breathing softly behind me. With my back turned, I wasn't sure if she was asleep yet or not.

""

I remembered.

The past.

Our past.

Five years ago.

Five whole years...

"Li-chan."

She already called me that.

She had opened her heart to me like I had never been
away.

I could see right inside. It had never closed at all.

Five years.

I never enjoyed meeting old acquaintances.

Whether they had changed or not.

It still made me sad.

But when I came back to Japan, I went straight to see her.
Even before my own family.

The girl with the blue hair.

Her face looked the same.

As if those five years had never happened.

I closed my eyes.

I had not lain next to anyone in a long while.

Akane had told me to jump her bones...

...if I wanted to be her one and only.

I didn't want her to love me...

...I wanted her to choose me.

"...nonsense..."

If...

If,

I said I already had,

Would Akane have mocked me?

And not with love in mind...

...but ruination.

"....."

But, Akane...

There was no point to it at all.

Really.

No point at all.

So...

What am I to do?

Tell me.

Day 5 (1) - Beheading 2

Chiga Akari - Triplet Maid - Eldest

Chiga Hikari - Triplet Maid - Middle

Wolves die. Pigs die.

1

I was awakened by a violent pounding on the door. Blearily, I stumbled to my feet, and opened the door. Hikari lunged into the room, and grabbed a fistful of my shirt.

"You son of a bitch!" she screamed.

Okay. Not Hikari. The world would revolve five thousand times a second before Hikari said anything like that. It was physically impossible for Hikari to ever say something like that, not to mention roughly grab a fistful of my shirt. Hikari did not possess the ability. In other words, this...well, Teruko seemed equally unlikely, so...Akari?

"It's all your fault! You bastard! You unbelievable bastard!"

But even if it was Akari, this was a shocking turn of events. She was completely beside herself, and looked ready to punch me. She already had hit me several times. I was just so thrown by all of this I had not felt a thing.

"It's happening again," she sobbed, shaking. "Too much... it's all too much... why... why... why!?"

"Calm down, Akari," I said, grabbing her shoulders roughly. "What happened?"

Akari glared at me.

Pure hatred in her eyes.

Like she was here for vengeance.

She looked so sad.

Glaring with all her might.

Hikari had said they'd been trained. Akari must have received the same training as Hikari. But here she was, a complete mess. What had happened?

There was a long silence. Finally Akari shook her head.

"Sorry. I apologize. I lost control." She hung her head. "It's not your fault...I know it's not your fault."

"I don't mind, really. What happened?" I asked again. "Tell me what's going on."

Akari turned her back on me. "Come to the store room," she said, and walked away.

I stood rooted to the spot.

"...what? ...hunh...?"

Akari and Teruko must have arrived back from the mainland at some point. I looked at the watch Kunagisa had repaired for me. It was past ten. (Hard to tell, with the numbers reversed.) I had overslept. What a disgrace.

But now was not the time for that. Didn't matter when Akari got back, what time it was, or how long I'd slept. What mattered, was...

What mattered was.

"What did Akari say?"

The store room?

This was bad.

Who was in the store room?

This was bad.

What was happening on this island?

This...was bad.

If my guess was right...

...then things were really bad.

"Wake up, Tomo."

"...hnya...? 'ning, Ii-chan." Kunagisa lifted her head, and gave me a contented smile. As if she'd been having wonderful dreams. "Put my hair up."

"No time for that, Tomo."

Kunagisa rubbed her eyes. "Then I don't have to wash my face?"

The door opened inwards.

Beyond it, Akane lay perpendicular to us, giving us a clear view of the severed flesh, bone, and blood vessels, a grotesque cross section of all that kept us alive.

Yes.

Another headless corpse.

Just like Kanami's body had been, her head had been severed at the root.

The body was dressed in a suit. An expensive looking gray one – stained forever with blood. Even if it had not been stained, like the dress Kanami had worn, the person who should wear it was no longer alive.

This drab little room.

I had spent three days here.

Akane had not lasted the night.

An empty room.

Nothing by a wooden chair near the wall, an intercom phone next to it, a futon, a few books Akane must have brought with her, and a light.

"The door was locked," Ilia said. "Right, Hikari?"

"Yes," Hikari said, her voice trembling. I looked, and she was shaking like a leaf. "I'm sure of it."

"Then...the window?"

I looked up at it.

It was opposite the door, at the top of the far wall. A rectangular window that served no other purpose than to let light into the room. Not really a window people could get in and out by, but...

It was open.

You could only open the window by operating a lever from the inside. It was just large enough for a person to squeeze

in and out, but...

But it was too...too...

"Too high up," I muttered aloud.

Getting into the room through that window was like jumping out a second story window, and getting out of it was even harder. In fact, I'd chosen this room to lock her up in precisely because I'd assumed nobody could get through the window.

The window was inaccessible.

And yet...

The only other exit was the door, which was locked.

Which meant...

...this was another locked room.

Two headless bodies, and two locked rooms.

A second headless body, and a second locked room.

I could hear Kunagisa groaning aloud.

I started to speak, but held my tongue.

The headless body in front of us belonged to the person we'd believed to be the killer. What possible reaction could there be but silence?

There was no sign of the head.

Like with Kanami, this could not be suicide, or accidental.

"Well. This certainly changes everything," Ilia said. "Shall we gather in the dining room? Hikari, lock this room again, please."

Once again, Ilia left the scene first. Rei quietly following behind her.

"It changes everything, hunh?" I said, bitterly. This was true. Everything I thought or suggested needed to be abandoned. We had to start over, from the top. And with new mysteries on top of those.

"So now we have a series. A series of murders," I

muttered, grimly.

A second murder.

I'd locked Akane away to prevent this from happening.
But all it did was get her killed.

I'd been so confident. So sure it would work. So sure I could control someone capable of chopping another person's head off. So sure they would think and act in ways I could predict.

I'd been naive.

Pathetically naive.

Downright stupid.

As if I could ever stop the killer from acting. The nerve.
The audacity. The conceit.

I remembered what Akane had said the night before.

How she'd thanked me.

Thanked me? For this?

"Nonsense. In the end."

I turned on my heel, putting my back to the body.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Yayoi. She looked very pale. Even worse than the day before. Seeing headless bodies two days in a row could do that to people. Human bodies didn't work like chicken or pork.

Even so...Yayoi saw me looking, and quickly headed towards the dining room, like she was running away from me.

I was puzzling about this when Kunagisa tugged my arm.

"Ii-chan, come on! We're keeping Ilia waiting. Everyone else is already there."

"Oh...right, okay."

I nodded.

Everything had changed. We had to think things through again.

The morning of the fifth day had not started well.

"Two o'clock in the morning," Hikari said.

The dining room.

The round table.

Two people missing that had been there just two days before.

Ibuki Kanami, genius painter, and Sonoyama Akane, member of the Seven Fools.

The two of them had argued bitterly at dinner the day before yesterday, and now neither was alive.

"Sonoyama called my room, and asked me to bring her a book she had left in her room."

"Then?" Ilia asked. "You brought her the book, as she asked?"

"Yes," Hikari nodded. "It was an old paperback; Mushakoji Saneatsu's Baka Ichi."

"That hardly matters. The point is, she was alive at the time, yes? She had a head and everything?"

"Yes. She was definitely still alive."

So Akane must have been murdered after two AM. I had assumed I was the last person to see her alive. Although, strictly speaking, I had spoken to her through the door, and not actually seen her.

Akane's body was discovered at nine thirty that morning. She had always woken up at the same time, and always taken breakfast at that hour, so when they didn't hear from her Hikari went to see if something was wrong, and found her body.

Hikari had assumed Akane had overslept, unused to her new quarters...but that was not the case. If what Hikari said was true, the murder could have happened anywhere in that seven and a half hours. The body did not appear to be freshly dead, so it was probably safe to assume the murder had taken place in the small

hours of the morning.

"Okay," Ilia said, looking around the table. "Then shall we begin with alibis again?"

Like she was enjoying this game. I could not hope to see what lay in Ilia's mind, but there was certainly no trace of sadness, depression, or nerves there.

Fair enough. We were all strangers, after all. I could not blame her for it.

"This time I have no alibi." When nobody spoke, I figured I might as well start again. "Hikari came to our room between ten and eleven. After that, Kunagisa and I both went to bed."

"The same bed?" Ilia said, grinning.

"Hardly. I slept on the sofa."

"Oh. Well, if you were asleep, you couldn't have known if the other one snuck out of the room."

"Mm-mm. Well, it definitely wasn't me," Kunagisa said, sliding a hand sideways across her throat. "The store room is on the first floor, right? I can't go down stairs alone."

"Hunh?"

Everyone stared at her in shock. Well, everyone but Maki, who maintained a smug look as if she'd known all along. But then, she probably had.

"That's why I brought Ii-chan with me."

Indeed. I was not here simply out of boredom and curiosity. There was a real reason, a real need for me to be here with Kunagisa Tomo.

Kunagisa had a number of qualities and quirks which prevented her from leading an ordinary life. Three of which were particularly prominent. One of those was the complete inability to make dramatic vertical movements on her own.

It was a rule.

Less a characteristic or an idiosyncrasy or a foible than a

firm, clear, unyielding rule built into the fabric of her mind. If you tried to force her she'd throw a fit, crying and screaming and refusing to let go of your hand. She'd been like that five years ago, and was no better upon my return.

"Really...?" Ilia said, astonished. "This is the first I've heard of it."

"Not the sort of thing you brag about. But if you watch closely, you might have noticed. Have you ever seen me climbing the stairs alone? Since I arrived here?"

She was always with me at meals. At all other times, she was in her room.

Kunagisa Tomo.

"Now that you mention it, your friend there always went to get you before meals...hmm. But there's no way for us to verify this, is there?"

"She has a certificate from her doctor," I said. "It's a psychogenic reaction; a type of psychological impairment. I think that will be enough to establish Kunagisa's alibi."

I still didn't have one, though.

Ilia thought about this for a moment, but then gave up. "Himena?" she said, turning to Maki.

"I was in my room, drinking all night." She looked at Shinya. "With my handsome gentleman friend here."

"Is that true, Sakaki?"

"I'm not a gentleman, but otherwise, yes," Shinya said, nodding. "I only meant to stay a while, but...we ended up going all night again."

Two all night drinking binges in a row. Easier said than done. Shinya could hardly be blamed for it, though. After what had happened to Kanami, it would be a wonder if he stayed sober.

I felt like I could tell just how important she'd been to him now. He'd taught her to paint, and she'd become far better than

him.

He treasured her.

"Neither Himena or I got all that drunk, so I think we can safely vouch for each other," Shinya said. "Around one AM...I couldn't sleep, what with all that happened. I went to the living room, and Himena was there. She asked me to join her, and we went to her room, and before we knew it...it was morning."

Well, there you had it. Even if there was more to it than that, he had almost certainly been in Maki's room the whole time. Once again, Maki and Shinya had firm alibis.

"I was asleep in my room the whole time," Yayoi blurted. Without being asking, jumping her turn in line. "I have no alibi. I woke up at six, and began making breakfast...from that point on, Hikari helped out a little, and can speak for me, I guess."

She spoke cautiously, watching Ilia's expression closely. Something seemed off about her; why was she acting like this? I couldn't quite put my finger on what was bothering me about it, and had no idea what might motivate such behavior.

"Hmm," Ilia said. "Then...Hikari?"

"Like I said, I brought a book to Sonoyama at two, and then went to sleep. Until I woke up this morning, I have no alibi."

"Yes...I suppose I had better make my own statement. I was talking to Rei in my room all night. Planning for the future, and quite a bit about Aikawa. Right, Rei?"

Rei nodded silently.

"We went to bed at noon yesterday, so were hardly ready for sleep in the evening. By the time our conversation ended, it was morning. There seemed little point in sleeping at that point, so we had breakfast. I believe that qualifies as an alibi, yes?" Ilia asked. For some reason, she looked at me.

This seemed rather like a challenge. I chose not to take it, and readily agreed with her.

"Akari, Teruko...when did you return?"

"Around nine," Akari said. She seemed to have recovered completely from her earlier display, but was avoiding my eye.

"Nine...?"

Now that I thought about it, Akari had said something odd. She's said, "It's happening again." What had she meant by that? She sounded like she was talking about a deep seated trauma.

I was pretty sure she was referring to something that happened before Kanami's murder...

"Then we can assume Akari and Teruko have an alibi," Ilia said. "So Sakaki, and Himena, Rei and I, Akari and Teruko, and...well, Kunagisa as well. Seven of us have alibis."

Which left three of us without. Sashirono Yayoi, Chiga Hikari, and me. Alibis were certainly an important consideration, but in this case there was one thing even more important.

"Um, Hikari..."

"Yes?" she said, looking at me.

"You might not remember this, but when you brought her the book at two, was the store room window open? Or was it closed?"

Hikari stared at the ceiling for a moment, thinking. "I think it was closed," she said.

"Okay. Is it easily opened?"

"Yes. It was intended to air out the place...if you turn the lever...like this. It opens and closes. But only from the inside. There's no way to open it from the outside. It doesn't move at all."

"I see..."

That made things harder. And harder in a very bad way. The window was three meters off the floor. You'd need a ladder to climb out of it, and getting in was even trickier.

Definitely a locked room.

"Um, so...Hikari, where was the room key kept? Were

their spares?"

"I had the key on my person the whole time. There are no spare keys, and the mansion has no master key."

Hikari sounded reluctant to admit this. Of course she did; it meant the only person who could have carried out the crime was her. Looked at as objectively as possible, from the facts alone, that certainly did seem to be the most logical solution.

But I was not about to point that out. I'd already screwed things up enough with Akane.

"What kind of lock?"

"The normal kind. You turn it and the bolt slides home...I don't know the technical name for these things."

"You're sure you locked it at two?"

"...yes. I'm sure I did. I double-checked to be sure." She looked reluctant to admit it. "No question there."

"Okay."

So honest.

So honest her life must have been a hard one.

This was enough to convince me she was not the killer. If Hikari had been the killer, she would never have admitted to locking the door, much less to the fact that she visited the room late at night. No guilty person would have been so stupid.

Although, of course, she could just want me to think that. But considering possibilities of that type would never get me anywhere.

"Was there anyone else in the room at two?" I asked. "It was dark in there...could someone have been hiding?"

"I think I would have noticed," Hikari said, seeming baffled by the question. "But I can't say for sure. I didn't go in the room or anything. I just handed the book over at the entrance."

"Weren't you scared?" Yayoi asked, her voice almost inaudible. Anxiously watching Hikari's face, she continued, "You

knew...Sonoyama might be the killer? Meeting her in the middle of the night...weren't you scared?"

"No, not at all," Hikari said, awkwardly. "I didn't think Sonoyama was the killer."

"Why not?" Yayoi said, suddenly insistent. "Why would you think that?"

"Well..." Hikari said, glancing at me. Oh. Because of what Kunagisa and I had told her the night before. Akane was no longer the only suspect.

As the two of them talked, I tried to think. Tried, but got nowhere. If there were any clues, I had thought they would come from Hikari's book delivery, but she'd told me nothing.

In which case...

How to proceed?

"But we can't really call it a locked room, can we? I mean, the window was open," Ilia said. "That alone defies the definition."

"But you can't get in and out of that window."

"There was a chair. If you stood on it..."

"You still couldn't reach it. Even if you stretched out all the way and jumped. Shinya's the tallest person here, and I doubt even he could manage it."

"I see. So Ibuki's murder was a locked room because of the paint river, and this time we have a locked room because of the height." Ilia sighed, and stretched her arms. "And both victims were beheaded."

Yeah, that was also a mystery.

Why had the killer cut off Kanami and Akane's heads? I couldn't figure it out. The main reason to do so was to switch places. There was no reason to suggest that here, but what other reason could there be? Sadism? General craziness?

And even worse, the killer had taken the heads away. It

seemed possible he had beheaded them so he could take the heads away, but what possible use was a human head?

But once I started asking questions like that, it was a slippery slope to why kill at all... I didn't know. I didn't understand any of this. It was a complete mystery.

Damn it.

When had I become this stupid?

"Well," Ilia said, abruptly. "The most suspicious one is definitely Hikari."

"Eh? Um...me?"

"You had the key, and you're one of three people with no alibi. If entry through the window was impossible, then the only way in was through the door. Of the three people without an alibi, only Hikari had a key."

"Wait a minute," I said, interrupting her. "This is wrong. You can't just accuse someone like this."

"Accuse? I am simply voicing what I have deduced."

Hikari looked nervously at each of us, at a complete loss.

"Like Akane said yesterday, choosing a criminal through selective thinking and the process of elimination is absurd. I wouldn't go so far as to say absurd, myself, but neither is it a particularly productive way to proceed. Remember, it is easier to accuse than to be accused."

"I hardly see the problem with it."

"That kind of thinking led us to lock Akane in the store room, as the prime suspect. And this is the result, Ilia. There's nothing we can do about past mistakes, but we can stop ourselves from repeating them. You see? Being alone is dangerous."

"Too late for that," Ilia said, with a sweet smile that in other circumstances would have been downright compelling. Attractive. "Must I remind you who suggested we imprison Akane...for her own good, was it?"

"It was me, yes. I make no excuses. It was my idea to lock her up. That is why I feel duty bound to argue with you here. If locking her up was my responsibility, than making sure we do not repeat that mistake is also my responsibility. It is simply far too soon to begin accusing anyone of anything. We have not yet considered everything there is to consider."

Maki yawned. Perhaps she was just sleepy after two all-nighters, or perhaps we were boring her. Probably both.

Spectator.

"Hmph. I don't see how that makes Hikari any less suspicious."

Her tone showed not an ounce of consideration for the maid who'd dutifully served her all these years. No sentimental loyalty at all. She was simply stating the facts, without emotion of any kind.

I felt like I understood...

...the answer to Kunagisa's question.

Why she had been disinherited.

Why she was on this island.

Akagami Ilia saw the world and everything in it as utterly equal...equally valueless. That was why she searched for things of value. Unable to find them, she could cut anything loose at any time.

I had assumed she must have done something.

I had wondered what she could have done.

But both thoughts had missed the point. Ilia would not have remained in the family even if she had done nothing at all. It was not even clear if the Akagami family had cut her loose, or she them. This was how things had to be.

So much for my assumption...

...that Ilia would be the one defending Hikari.

"All right, how's this," I said, not looking at Ilia. "From

this point on, being alone is dangerous. We should remain in teams. You have no objections to this, Ilia? I don't need to explain why, do I? It's safer than being alone. We can keep watch on each other. Since I've defended Hikari, I volunteer to be on a team with her. Kunagisa, Hikari and I are Team A. How does that sound?"

"Hmm. Interesting," Ilia said, and managed to sound a little impressed. "You're smarter than you look. Well...then I will join with Rei...and Akari and Teruko. The four of us. That leaves Maki, Shinya, and Yayoi as Team C. Shinya and Maki have proven themselves not the killer two nights in a row, so Yayoi can feel safe in their company. And if Yayoi is the killer, then they have the advantage of numbers, so can feel equally secure. Any objections?"

"Alternatively, we could all remain in the same room...like here, in the dining room. Until Aikawa gets here," Hikari said, nervously. "If we all just stay still, none of us ever alone, nothing can happen."

"Don't be absurd. Stay still? Out of the question," I said, addressing everyone. "Kunagisa and I have things to do."

4

The first thing we had to do was bury Akane. Just like Kanami the day before, leaving her like that was not an option. Ilia continued to insist that the police were not to be called, in which case, this was the only option.

Like we had the day before, we planned to take a record of the scene with Kunagisa's digital camera, and then we would bury her in the woods out back. Since Hikari was on our team, she came with us to Kunagisa's room to get the camera...at which point our plans went awry.

"Hnya!" Kunagisa shrieked, as we stepped into the room.

I peered over her shoulder, and soon understood why.

"Wow. This is just..."

"Ah...oh..." even Hikari was thrown. "This is awful."

Destruction.

Absolute destruction.

Everything inside had been destroyed. Kunagisa's computing trifecta; both PCs, and the workstation, smashed to pieces.

"God! How could you let this happen!?" Kunagisa wailed, half-mad with grief. She flung herself to her knees next to the pile of shattered computers. "Too too too too too too too cruel! Abuse! Devilry! There's a devil on this island! A diabolical one, Ii-chan! Tragedy is upon us! Augh! If this were a human they'd have all organs pulped and all bones fractured! Even the screens are broken! What possible purpose could that serve!? It took me *so long* to make this keyboard! And my holographic memory! What happened to the motherboard? It's been broken over the devil's kneeeeeeeee!"

She was broken. Beside herself. She was usually such a happy-go-lucky kid, and almost never reduced to outbursts like this. It was the first such display I'd witnessed since returning to Japan.

"Why would anyone do this? Ah...ah...the horror...Ii-chan. Ii-chan Ii-chan Ii-chan Ii-chan, what is this?!"

"A tragedy." No normal person would so thoroughly destroy a computer, even if it had murdered their parents. Kunagisa's computers had been ruined beyond all sense. "Did they smash it with a lead pipe? Not the most efficient way to destroy them...or maybe an axe?"

"But why? Who did it? The killer?" Hikari whispered.

The killer? The same killer that had murdered Kanami and Akane? But what for? What could the killer possibly have gained from destroying Kunagisa's computers?

"Hnya. I can't take this. I can feel the tears coming,"

Kunagisa sobbed, genuinely looking like she was about to start crying. She moved away from the computing wreckage, unable to look at it any more. "Sniff...oh, well! I already sent back ups of all the files back home! Still. All that work I put into these machines. I never imagined this could happen. From now on, all my computers will be indestructible! At least, the motherboards."

"You have back ups? Well, that's some small salvation. It would be a shame to lose the program you were writing."

But that was not much of a salvation. Kunagisa had hand-crafted every one of those computers, and the things themselves were more valuable than anything they contained.

"Hnya. Now we can't view the pictures we took with the camera. My digital camera and cell phone have both been murdered too. Does money mean nothing to this killer!?"

"Like it means anything to you," I said. "Mm...? Oh, right."

I snapped my fingers. Looking closely, it was clear the digital camera had been smashed into even tinier pieces than everything else. Apparently the destructor's real goal was the camera.

"Ah ha. How obvious," I muttered. "Nice and simple. I was worried this would complicate things."

"Um, what do you mean?" Hikari asked. "Do you know why they did this?"

"Yes. You saw it yesterday, right? Kunagisa took photographs of Kanami and the studio, and moved them via a USB cable to her hard drive. I don't know if the killer knew that, but the images she took were a problem."

The workstation and cell phone were destroyed just in case.

Kanami's room.

The photographs of it.

"That's what the killer was after."

We hadn't told anyone about the e-mail from Chee-kun, or the information on it. The killer could not have known. But everyone knew about the pictures.

"Ah!" Kunagisa sighed. "I shouldn't have bothered protecting anything. I never imagined anyone would resort to brute force!"

"There's no way you could have locked this room," Hikari said. "Such bad luck."

I patted Kunagisa on the head.

"Okay. Now we can't stand around and wait for the detective to get here." I put my hands on her shoulders, almost like an embrace. "We've got to take action."

Who was the killer? I had no idea. And I didn't know what they wanted. But now there was one thing that I knew, one thing that was perfectly clear.

The bastard had destroyed something precious to Kunagisa.

Fine.

If that's the way they wanted to play it...

"Eh? Wait...hang on a second," Hikari said, suddenly. "Who did this?"

"...the killer? Whoever that is..."

"But...we were all in the dining room. And we came straight here from there. Did any of us have time to stop and smash all these computers?"

I gaped at her.

We'd been in the room until Akari had come to fetch us. We were the last people to arrive at the store room. When we got there, everyone else had already arrived. And then we all went to the dining room.

Which means...this was impossible. Logically, none of us

could ever have destroyed the computers.

".....? But this is definitely the work of a human. But if none of us could have done it..."

I didn't understand. Yet another mystery. Like Kanami's locked room and Akane's headless body...no.

This was different. The mystery here was nothing like those other questions. The very nature of it was utterly unrelated. This was not a trick, or a gimmick – it was impossible.

In which case...

"Is this the key to everything?"

I looked at Kunagisa. Then at Hikari.

And then I thought.

If this was the key...

Then where was the door?

5

Since there was nothing to be done about the computers, we went ahead with the next stage of our plan – Akane's burial.

We went to the store room, and loaded Akane's corpse onto a stretcher, and dragged it into the forest out back. The stretcher was here for emergencies, but I imagined this was not the sort of emergency they had imagined.

Or...

Perhaps they had.

This time we were burying her as is, with no sleeping bag. Hikari took the head of the stretcher, and I took the back. Hikari had not served all these years as a maid for nothing, and was quite a bit stronger than her tiny frame would suggest. Kunagisa carried the shovel, and followed behind us.

236

From behind the body, I had no way of avoiding looking at Akane's headless body. I might be used to this kind of thing, but that didn't make it any less unpleasant to see.

As we carried, her, I asked, "Hikari, is this what Akane was wearing when you brought her the book?"

"Yes, the same," Hikari said. "Of course, at the time, she had a head."

Not funny.

I was not in the mood for gallows humor.

Since the digital camera had been smashed beyond repair, we'd been unable to take a record of the scene of Akane's murder. This was probably the killer's goal.

But the killer had underestimated one thing.

Kunagisa Tomo's memory.

"Hnya. Hnya hnya. But if the killer wanted to smash the pictures of Kanami's crime scene, why? Had we photographed something that was a dead give away? I don't remember anything like that..."

Kunagisa's head contained both the crime scene from yesterday, and the new one we'd just visited – at at least the same level of detail as the digital camera would have. They didn't call her a savant for nothing.

"Anything bugging you at all?"

"Mm, quite a lot. Trying to narrow it down. Hmm..." she muttered.

It was probably best to leave her alone. I looked back at Hikari.

"Where should we bury her?" I asked.

"Definitely not by Ibuki's side..."

I agreed.

We wandered through the woods a ways, and finally found a place with enough room to dig. Yesterday, there'd been two men working, but today I was alone, and it took a lot out of me. I wanted to ask for Shinya's help, but he was on a different team. And burying people you knew two days in a row was an awful lot

to ask of anybody.

...anybody not as damaged as me.

Being able to do this was a personality flaw.

"Deep enough," I said, pushing hair out of my face. If this had been summer, I'd have been soaked in sweat. I climbed out of the hole, and we lowered Akane's body into it. For a moment, we were silent. I'm not sure there was any reason to be, but it just felt right.

I, Sonoyama Akane, have no complaints, no matter when, where, how, or who by I shall be murdered.

The last words she ever said to me. But was that really true? Now that she really had been murdered, had she accepted it like a saint, like a martyr, with no complaints?

I could never do that.

"I wish we could bury the head with her," Hikari said. "Ibuki too. Why did the killer cut off their heads?"

"Been asking myself the same question. The answer's always the same."

'I don't know.'

I picked up the shovel again, and began to fill in the grave. My muscles would be screaming tomorrow. Assuming my nerves were not too numb to feel pain by then. Who knows, I might end up being the next victim. The odds were not high, but not low enough to ignore, either.

Serial murders.

Perhaps things would end with only two deaths. According to Chee-kun's data, the two of them had some connection, whatever it was; there was a chance the murders were already done. But that was a little too much to hope for.

At last, Akane was buried.

"Hikari, as long as we're outside anyway, can you take us to see the store room window from the outside?"

"Sure, this way."

Hikari began walking away.

Kunagisa followed after her, blue hair swaying. I'd yet to put her hair up today. I'd have to do that when we got back to her room.

Hikari looked back at me. "Thank you," she said, very serious. I had no idea what for. "You defended me this morning, didn't you? Thank you."

"Oh...I wasn't really trying to defend you. I just didn't want to make the same mistake. Even if it wasn't a mistake, I don't like repetition."

This was why my memory was so bad.

"Especially at a time like this."

"Nya ha ha, so like you, Ii-chan!" Kunagisa said, beaming. "But you were defending Hikari, and you know it! Hikari's your type with a capital T."

"So what is my type, exactly?"

"Older, female, short, long hair, slender, no rings or anything, and wearing an apron dress."

"I deny the last one."

"Or topless with jeans. Or wearing a white coat and glasses like a librarian. Or delinquent girls that are taller than you, have brown hair, and wear tracks suits."

"Must you reveal all my fetishes?"

She never could keep secrets.

But it was true that Hikari was my type. Speed wise, I did prefer aggressive personalities like Akari, but it wasn't like I disliked softer slow pitches like Hikari. Which I guess made Teruko a curve ball?

This made no sense, even to me.

Hikari sighed, embarrassed. She smiled awkwardly. "Well, I wanted to thank you. Miss Ilia can be...rather a cold person

sometimes. And unlike the situation with Sonoyama, this time even I can tell that I'm the only believable suspect. With Sonoyama, we knew it was a locked room, so nobody could have done it, but this time..."

"No use going over that again, Hikari," I said, impatiently. "You've been polite to me. Never lied to me. Kept your word. No need for gratitude."

"But..."

"If our positions had been reversed, would you have thrown me to the wolves? No, you'd have done what you could to help me."

"And then you would have thanked me for it."

Good point.

Hikari was not to be trifled with.

"See, we're friends, Hikari," Kunagisa said. "We don't doubt our friends. I know you and Ii-chan aren't the killer."

"Friends," Hikari said, sounding touched. "I've never had any friends. I've spent my whole life at Miss Ilia's side..."

"I've never had friends, either. Neither has Ii-chan. That's why I'm glad you're our friend, Hikari."

Kunagisa took Hikari's hand.

To an outsider, this must have seemed rather adorable. But realistically speaking, it would be difficult for Kunagisa and Hikari to remain friends, I thought. Hikari would remain here on this island, and Kunagisa would be leaving. Once she returned, Kunagisa would never leave her apartment.

Kunagisa Tomo lived in isolation.

There was an old saying that geniuses were complete in themselves. In that sense, Kunagisa Tomo was definitely a genius. Although that was hardly the only thing that made someone a genius.

And since I...

...could only see things in this light...

...I was the most isolated of us all.

"Oh, here. That window." Hikari said.

I stared blankly for a second. I didn't see any windows that could be it. "Wait, you mean this?" I said, pointing to a window at chest height.

"Yes."

"But...it's so low!"

"It's high on the inside wall, but this side of the house is half-buried in the mountain."

I leaned over and looked inside. I could see a pool of blood, a wooden chair, and the open door. The same store room I'd slept in, and Akane was murdered in.

This corner of the house was half-underground, which is why it had been made into a dimly lit store room in the first place.

"That means it isn't very difficult to get inside."

"But you can't open the window from outside. It's not locked or anything, but with this sort of design, shaking the frame isn't really going to get you anywhere."

"Then the only remaining possibility is that Akane must have opened the window herself, and let the killer in," Kunagisa said. "Someone knocked, she opened it. Come on in!"

"I doubt she'd be dumb enough to let the killer in, though. I mean, this is Akane. And even then, the window is so high up. Looking down makes me dizzy. I certainly would never risk jumping down."

Since the window opened diagonally, you couldn't even balance yourself before jumping. A poor landing would easily result in broken bones. If you hit your head, you'd die.

"Even if Akane did invite the killer in, the moment they tried to kill her, Akane could easily have called for help. The intercom phone is right there."

"Maybe they got her while she was sleep—oh, right, I'm an idiot. If she'd been sleeping, she couldn't have let them in."

"Even if we chose to cheerily ignore that problem, there's no way out of the room again. Even a professional rock climber couldn't scramble up a perfectly flat wall."

"What if it was a gecko? Ha ha ha!" Kunagisa poked her head in the window, and looked down. "Hmm. Looks dangerous. Li-chan, what if they used a rope?"

"A rope...but there's no trees nearby to tie it to."

I looked around us. Either they'd cleared the trees or built the house in a clearing; there was no trees large enough to support a rope near by. And nothing tree-like, either.

"And rappelling's not as easy as it looks. I've done it myself, so I know just how hard it is. The skin of your hands peels off. We'd have noticed."

"If they wore gloves?"

"Right. But chances of that are still pretty low. They're more likely to have got a ladder and stuck it in the window."

"But the opening isn't big enough for a ladder. It would get stuck halfway down, and once it was stuck, you couldn't get in after it."

"Yeah. Hikari, is there a ladder on the island?"

"No."

"Could anyone have brought one?"

"I don't think so. We'd have noticed something that large."

"A rope ladder? You could roll one up and smuggle it onto the island, and it wouldn't get caught on the window itself."

"Li-chan, have you got amnesia? You just pointed out there's nowhere to hang a rope from. You could fix metal hooks into the wall, but that would leave holes behind. Doesn't look like the wall's been touched."

She was right. All of this was obvious enough; no need to

say it out loud. But it was good to say things out loud, just in case you were missing something. Kept things balanced.

"Any ideas?" I said, turning to Hikari. "Anything at all."

"Not really," she said, moving over to the window. "But if we assume they didn't come in the door, then the killer must have come in through this window."

"Come in...maybe they didn't come in at all," I said, just throwing ideas around. "There's a chair down there, and Akane was sitting on it and reading, so if they used a lasso or something they could hook it around Akane's neck, and drag her up. Strangle her to death, pull her up to the window, and cut off her head. Does that work?"

Too far-fetched? But it fit the evidence. The same results without ever getting inside the room.

Or, wait... "No, that's impossible."

"Why? I thought it was a pretty good idea," Hikari said. "Anyone could have done it, too."

"Human bodies aren't that light."

Akane was hardly a small woman. She was taller than average, and must have weighed around fifty kilos. Less than sixty, to be sure, but definitely fifty or more. You'd need a pretty strong rope to lift her, and you'd have to be pretty strong to manage it. I could never have pulled it off. My arms alone were not nearly strong enough to lift someone this far.

"The strongest of us...is probably Shinya, but...he has an alibi. And even then, practically speaking, I doubt Shinya could have pulled her up this high. Especially if she was struggling."

And the intercom was right next to her. All she had to do was kick it over and someone would come running. It didn't seem like a very smart plan.

"And even then, the window would have to be open. Akane would have to open it, and then turn her back on the

window, but...she's not that stupid, surely. Anyone with half a brain would be more careful than that."

Yeah.

Damn it. Every time I thought I was getting a bit closer, I wound up back where I started. I felt like there was interference from another dimension or something. Like I was searching for balance in a world off-center. Something here was fundamentally wrong. We had made a hopeless mistake somewhere along the way, but what weren't we seeing?

I felt manipulated, somehow.

"Let's go back to the room. There's nothing else to be gained by staying here."

Not that there was anything to be gained in Kunagisa's room.

Kunagisa looked through the window one last time, but finally followed after us.

"Anything?"

"Nah, nothing. More importantly, Ii-chan, I'm hungry."

"Yeah."

"Then why don't we eat lunch?" Hikari said.

Fair enough.

Chiga Teruko - Triplet Maid - Youngest

Day 5 (2) – Lies

Don't you have anything better to do?

Ilia had excused Hikari from all regular duties. "Help Kunagisa out instead," she'd said. Which only sounded generous of her; more than likely, she wasn't about to let the prime suspect do any work. Even if that wasn't her only reason, it was certainly a big part of it.

So after lunch the three of us stayed together.

"Go back to the room ahead of me," I said, as we left the dining room. "I'm gonna swing by Ilia's room. Tomo, take this."

I pulled a small knife out of my pocket, and handed it to Kunagisa. Hikari looked surprised.

"You were carrying a knife around?"

"All boys have knives in their hearts."

"And girls have pistols!" Kunagisa proclaimed gleefully, slipping the knife into her pocket. "Come on, Hikari."

"But..."

"Don't worry, leave this to Li-chan."

Kunagisa half-dragged Hikari away. If Hikari was with her, Kunagisa would be able to climb the stairs. This was part of the reason why I'd wanted a three man team.

"Here goes nothing," I said, and headed for Ilia's room.

My second audience.

First, I gathered my nerves.

Then, I took a deep breath.

I knocked on the heavy door, waited for an answer, and then went inside. The whole team was inside – Ilia, Rei, Akari, and Teruko. They were all seated on couches, elegantly sipping tea.

Akari awkwardly avoided my eye. She must still be upset about her behavior this morning. I couldn't blame her, but she was

so obviously embarrassed by it that it was harder for me to act like nothing had happened.

Ilia looked at me, and smiled slowly. "What brings you here, um...what was your name again? You said yourself we needed to move in teams, yet here you are alone. Even though Hikari is on your team."

"Ilia," I said. "You still have no intention of calling the police?"

"None."

Flatly.

No beating around the bush, no wiggle room for a retort.

Absolutely magnificent.

You truly are a treasure, Akagami Ilia.

"It simply would not do."

"Would you like some tea?" Rei asked. She didn't wait for an answer. She rose, and moved over to the pot. Ilia gave her an interesting look before turning back to me.

"If the police arrived now, you'd be in hot water. Your plan got Akane killed."

"I hardly see that it matters at this point. I've been in hot water my whole life. More importantly, Ilia. Akagami Ilia. You're in a situation where you might well be murdered yourself. Doesn't that bother you?"

Rei gestured for me to sit, so I took the empty seat on the couch next to Teruko. Teruko did not even look at me. Behind those black framed glasses, her eyes were unfocused, and it was impossible to tell what they were looking at. Unfocused...no, her eyes were focused, just not on me.

The tea was very good.

Ilia waited a good long moment, letting me stew before answering.

"Does it bother me? This situation? Oh, it's terrible. A

terrible thing to have happen. And not just that... But let me ask you, instead – what do you make of it?"

"It's a very dangerous situation. I don't like being in the same place as a murderer."

I didn't want to leave Kunagisa in the same place as a murderer. I had no idea what she made of this situation. I never was good at that kind of understanding. But regardless...

"Hmm. You would claim that killing is wrong, then?"

"I would," I said. "Killing is wrong. Pretty sure of that. No matter what the reason, there's nothing worse than murder."

"Hmm. Then what would you do if someone tried to kill you? If you found yourself in a situation where you either had to kill or be killed? Would you let them kill you?"

"I would probably kill them. I don't claim to be a saint. But I would hate myself for it. Even if I'd killed...no matter who I'd killed."

"That sounds like the voice of experience," Ilia said, with a mean little smirk.

The sinister smile of someone absolutely secure in their superiority, overwhelmingly sure of their advantage.

She reminded me of someone...

Of Kanami. A smile that said, "You didn't even know *that*?" But Ilia was, ostensibly, no genius – so why would she be capable of producing the same kind of smile as Ibuki Kanami?

"You believe murderers must be punished? If I may use an analogy...put food in front of a mouse, but make it so the mouse receives an electric shock if it attempts to eat. What do you think the mouse will do?"

"Mice are capable of learning, so it will stop trying to eat."

"No. They are capable of learning, so it will learn to eat where there is no electric shock."

"Humans are not mice."

"And mice are not human." Ilia clapped her hands together. "If you remain convinced, then tell me: Why is it wrong to kill people?"

Like a junior high school student acting out.

She did not appear to be joking.

"Because the law says it is, because that belief makes life in society easier, and because anyone who does not want to be murdered should not murder."

"None of those are terribly convincing."

"I agree. So I choose to answer the question as follows – there is no reason. You need a reason to kill somebody. You would never kill someone without a reason. But this is not a choice. There is no choice to kill or not kill. Only would-be Hamlets go on pretending there's a choice. But the moment they start to question it, they've failed as a human being."

Aren't I *so* tormented?

Fuck off.

"Killing people is wrong. Fundamentally wrong. No reason is necessary."

"Interesting," Ilia said, clearly not impressed at all. "I suppose I understand why you might think that way. But in that case, the moment we know the killer, everything is over. And we'll know that as soon as Aikawa gets here."

"I don't know this Aikawa."

"But I do. That is enough. Akari, tell this boy when Aikawa will get here."

"Three days from now," Akari said, still not meeting my eye. "Faster than expected. So..."

"See? When we know who the killer is, you are free to leave. The only reason why you are on this island is because you are a suspect. You have no talent, no appeal, no other reason for you to be here. Come to think of it, you have no alibi for either

Ibuki or Sonoyama."

I put my half-drunk tea cup down on the saucer with a clunk. I took a nice deep breath, and slowly got to my feet.

"Forgive my rudeness," I said. "It seems we are speaking a different language."

"Indeed," she said, smiling. "The way out is over there."

"Teruko, escort him to his room," Rei said. "It is better not to be alone...and you are in no danger, right?"

Teruko nodded silently, and stood up. I didn't see why she would be in no danger, and this confused me momentarily, so before I knew it Teruko was already in front of me, leading the way. I hastily followed.

By the time I made it to the hall, Teruko was already a fair ways down it. She had an interesting definition of 'escort.' I had no idea what she was thinking. She didn't seem like the oblivious type, but...

I had to half-jog to catch up.

So, yeah.

We had genuinely...failed to communicate at all. I had been pretty sure we wouldn't see eye to eye, but had not expected it to be quite so catastrophic. What was clear was that Ilia completely trusted this Aikawa, but did great detectives like that really exist?

I hoped so.

Fervently.

Hoped and prayed.

From the bottom of my heart.

"That's nonsense, too..."

I sighed again. I'd have to try again later. Without Ilia's cooperation – she owned the place, after all – there was no way to progress the situation. I wouldn't brag about it or anything, but I could be pretty persistent. I never knew when to give up or back

off. I was horrible. I wasn't about to give up this easily.

"

"

Hunh?

Did someone just say something? I felt like I'd heard a voice. I looked around, but saw only Teruko and myself. Then it must have been my imagination. Hearing things. Wow, I must be more frazzled than I thought.

Hmm.

Wait.

The voice had come from in front of me.

Which meant...

There was one possibility. An incredibly low one, but it was technically possible. Logically speaking I knew it was ridiculously improbable, but just in case, on the off chance, on the very slim chance...

"Teruko, did you say something?"

And then...

Teruko stopped in her tracks.

"I said: You should try dying once."

I gaped at her.

Not only had Teruko never uttered a single syllable in front of me before, but the first thing I heard from her was, "Try dying." This was simply too much to process. Could this really be happening?

Teruko turned towards me, and fixed me with a glare. Her gaze alone qualified as abuse! I staggered. For a long minute I tried to fight back, but I simply was no match for her, and eventually was forced to pretend she wasn't there and walk past her. At which point she grabbed my arm.

And twisted it.

My elbow screamed.

Not relaxing her grip one iota, Teruko dragged me into the

nearest room and slammed the door behind her. Then she threw me onto a couch. She sat down opposite me, and took off her glasses.

"...are those fake!?"

"Makes it easier to tell me apart."

She looked up at me.

Her voice was exactly the same as Akari's, or Hikari's.

Clear, and beautiful.

"...seriously?"

"I'm lying. I simply don't wish to see your face."

"....."

"I'm lying. I just wanted to see the look on your face."

"...what do you want with me?"

I was completely unable to work out what she was after, but I thought letting her continue to toy with me would be a bad idea. I hoped to wrest some sort of control back with this question, but Teruko point blank ignored me. She looked around us carefully.

"Let me offer a warning," she said, at last. As if she was talking to the ghost possessing me. "You are better off living alone. Nobody is better off when you're around."

This was made worse by the fact that, without her glasses, Teruko looked exactly like Akari or Hikari. It was one thing for Maki to say things like this, but quite another for one of them.

It felt like a betrayal.

"People who only cause problems for other people should stop being human. If not that, then they should spend the rest of their lives in isolation."

"Why do you say that?"

"I did it," she said, bluntly.

Her expression never changed.

Not even a flicker.

"But you live here, with other people..."

"We stopped being human."

We.

Well.

Who was included in that word?

"Akari was rude to you this morning. I apologize," Teruko said, abruptly changing the subject. But her flat tone of voice and emotionless expression never changed.

"Why would you apologize?"

"That was me."

"....? Hunh?"

Teruko ignored my confusion.

"It was not me, but it was my body. The three of us share three bodies. All three of us have three personalities, so it was certainly Akari that berated you this morning, but the body belonged to me."

"Is that another lie?"

"It is."

Her voice never changed. Who was this woman? She really was a curve ball. Gone in the blink of an eye.

"Enough small talk."

This had been small talk?

"I would not recommend discussing the police in front of Miss Ilia. She has a great deal of patience, but her capacity for it is not infinite."

"Why is she so stubborn about it? It's clearly more than a desire to preserve peace on this island."

Peace was long since gone, anyway.

And Ilia hardly seemed to want peace in the first place.

"You want to know?"

"I do."

Teruko stood up.

And came over to me.

And leaned over me.

Her body touching mine.

Pressing up against me.

"No criminal likes the police," she said, in the same flat voice.

It took me a moment to catch her meaning, but even when I did, I did not know what to say.

"You must have wondered why she lives on this island alone. Do you know why?"

"Given her personality..."

"She failed."

Teruko's transitions were so abrupt I could hardly connect the pieces together. How could triplets, or even sisters, look this much alike, lead such similar lives, and yet be this dramatically different? Like they really did have MPD.

"Um. Failed...at what?"

"Kunagisa is unable to make vertical movements alone. This is why you are with us. Correct?"

"Yes," I said, playing along – which she clearly had no intention of doing. "What about it?"

"Miss Ilia is the exact opposite."

No hesitation, no waffling.

Like she was reading from a script.

Sight reading.

"That's why she is on this island, with nobody else around."

Before I could utter a word, she continued.

"Have you ever seen her left hand? If you saw the scars running across her wrist, you would understand."

Scars...on her wrist?

Teruko might be speaking in a monotone, but it was a

serious monotone.

"Abusive Behavior Syndrome. You must have heard of it."
Abusive Behavior Syndrome...D.L.L.R. Syndrome?

I had heard of it. The compulsion to cause harm to yourself and those around you. The most extreme form of compulsive behavior. Absolutely terrible, unquestionably unmanageable and unimaginably dangerous.

I'd read papers on it in the program, but had never seen anyone with it. I knew people who had. They said people with it could kill without remorse. They said it was terrifying.

Genuinely terrifying.

And Ilia had that?

But D.L.L.R. Syndrome was so rare it remained unclear if it even existed. It was such an extreme psychological condition that the chances of it actually occurring were minute. There were no recorded cases of it in Japan, and the examples found in the states could be counted on the fingers of one hand. Or was this another case of the Law of Large Numbers?

"Teruko, this is..."

"Just as we are triplets, Miss Ilia is a twin. Her sister – name of Odette."

The Iliad and the Odyssey.

Ha.

"So where is this sister?"

"Dead."

"...really?"

"Really. And it was Miss Ilia who killed Miss Odette. You see? You see what that means? You sat in there and ran your mouth off about Miss Ilia. There's nothing worse than her, you said."

"I didn't mean to."

"What you meant is of no consequence here. You

understand why she will not call the police? If you understand, then go back to your room. And don't make any more waves."

And with that, she stood up, as if she had said all she had to say, and was done with me.

But. But, Teruko...

Don't make any waves?

That...

That was *my* line.

"Teruko!" I said.

Cried out.

I had not expected her to stop, but she paused in the doorway.

"What?"

"Supposing..."

Supposing...

Supposing...

"Supposing there was a child raised for ten years without any form of human interaction, not even with their parents, locked away in a basement...can you imagine what kind of person they would become?"

Teruko had no answer.

I had not expected her to give me one.

I just wanted her to hear the question.

She was...

So flat, so emotionless, so subdued.

"We are very different people," Teruko said, crossly.

Like she saw right through me.

Even with her back to me.

"Do not imagine we are at all alike. It's creepy, sickening and very irritating."

"In that case, I'm sorry."

"There is no one on earth like you. No one in any world

like you. You are absolutely beyond the pale."

"I'd rather not be talked to like that. Especially by you."

"But only I can say this. Nobody else ever would." Teruko did not look back. Did not turn around. "You may not know why Himena goes after you like that. But the reason is obvious. She can read your mind. And everybody hates unclean things."

"....."

"I said you are filth."

"No need to repeat it. I know what I am. I know my own mind."

"Do you? Then how are you still alive? How do you have the nerve, the sheer gall to remain alive? I almost respect you for it. But do you imagine for a second that you could ever show what lay inside you to anyone and have them actually like you? Do you believe they would ever choose you? That notion is *really* beyond the pale."

I had no words.

Hers resonated.

The vibrations were too much for me.

They were tearing me down.

Shattering me.

Turning me to dust.

"How dare you associate other people while harboring a monster like that inside you. You go too far. The world will never forgive you for it. You have no right. That's why..."

Teruko opened the door.

And turned back towards me.

Her eyes were cold.

Like...

Like she despised everything she saw.

"...you should try dying."

Bam.

The door...
...slammed shut.
All strength drained out of me.
Like the ropes supporting me had snapped.
But there was no sense of relief.
"...christ."
What a clown.
I'd been beaten to a pulp.
Not a trace of me remained.
"The ultimate nonsense."
I sat and thought a while.

Going over every word Teruko had said. She'd had no logical flow, nothing as polished as Akane's version, but still, despite the lack of logic, despite the lack of any real explanations, she'd hit the nail on the head so many times, driving it deeper and deeper.

"Ah...this one really hurt."
I shook my head.
Stop thinking.
This is not what you need to think about.

I stood up and left the room. I looked around me in the hall, but Teruko was long gone. She moved like a cat. Much like me, I thought, but...

But what mattered now was the information she'd given me.

The scars on Ilia's wrist.
Ilia's background.
She killed her sister.
And was sent to this island.
Abusive Behavior Syndrome.
Compulsion.

With that in mind, with all it implied, I could understand

not calling the police.

"Hang on..."

I'd seen Ilia changing the day before. During my first audience. There'd been no scars on her wrist at all. Not that I'd been openly ogling her or anything, but I'm sure I would have noticed anything like that.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait..." I stopped, head in my hands.
"Then what's the truth?"

In conclusion.

Teruko is a huge liar.

Just like me.

2

On the way back to Kunagisa's room I ran into Maki, Shinya, and Yayoi. They were on their way to eat. Yayoi's team must always get great food. I was a little jealous. Not that I had any problems with Hikari's cooking.

"Ah ha ha, boy. Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha. AHH ha ha ha ha."

Maki began laughing wildly the moment she saw me. I no longer even considered this rude. It was more like the changing of the seasons.

"What is now, Maki...? You're always so wound up."

"Ah ha ha, boy! Teruko sure pulled a number on you. Absolutely hilarious! Hee! Serves you right!"

"...how do you know that?"

"You still asking me that? It was a pretty great *show*, Mr. Indecisive. You certainly can't be accused of leading a boring life! I'm almost jealous."

Yes, Maki must lead a boring life. She knew everything that had happened, was happening, and would happen next. Her life must be like watching a movie you'd already seen on endless repeat, a life without pleasure or purpose.

"It's not quite that bad," she said, shrugging dramatically. Had she been drinking again? She seemed a little buzzed. Like her head was filled with mentaiko.

She was glaring at me again.

"Say....should you really be alone at a time like this?" Shinya asked. He looked exhausted, but better than he had been. Not as pale. While it seemed cruel to point this out, it seemed time really did cure all wounds. "Kunagisa and Hikari must be anxious; they're both such tiny things. And Hikari's... kind of the prime suspect, right? Are you sure you want to leave your precious Kunagisa with her?"

He was joking, but there was genuine concern underlying it.

I bowed my head to show my appreciation.

"Heh heh heh. Well, we're be off, Mr. Half-assed. Good luck with all that thinking."

With that snide remark, Maki turned her back on me.

Shinya gave her a look, and then said, "If you're blaming yourself for Sonoyama, I don't think you should be. You did what you could. There was nothing else you could have done, and nothing else you should have done. What you did was the best possible choice."

"Thank you," I said.

"See you later," he said, and followed after Maki.

Yayoi stayed put for a moment, looking like she wanted to say something, but then hung her head and trailed after them.

"What was that about?"

It didn't seem suspicious or anything.

But it was certainly puzzling.

"Maybe not really worth worrying about."

I went back to the room, and Kunagisa was hunched over the pile of computer bits, while Hikari was cleaning. I asked, and

apparently Hikari simply could not sit still around something dirty. She had been cleaning almost every time I saw her. I had figured she was just a workaholic, but I guess everyone on the island was a little crazy somehow.

"Ooh, Ii-chan! Good timing."

"What?"

"Put my hair up."

Okay. I sat down behind her. I decided to make a whole lot of braids, so I started taking small bunches of hair, and weaving them into thin braids. Kunagisa sighed happily.

"Tomo, can I clear away this pile of junk?"

"Don't call it junk! Some pieces can still be used. I'm sorting it now. Got to recycle. For the good of the earth! Recycle! Recycling! Recyclist! But what should I make? Maybe a secret weapon to take down the killer!?"

Incorrigible. I did not want to be like her, but I was sometimes impressed with Kunagisa Tomo's capacity for positive thinking. Even if it only derived from an inability to harbor negative thoughts.

I sighed quietly.

"Say, Hikari. You wouldn't have, like, a notepad lying around? To write in?"

"There should be some in that cabinet. Why?"

"Gonna try and organize the facts."

We'd made the alibi form the day before, but that data was lost with the computers. Might as well make it again, and add in the new information.

Hikari went to get the notebook from the cabinet.

"Oh, right. Tomo, I forgot to tell you – I figured out what was bugging me about the picture."

"Mm? Oh yeah, you mentioned that. What was it, Ii-chan?"

"The watch," I said. "The watch."

"The watch?"

My watch. When I went to model for Kanami, I had not been wearing a watch. It was broken, so I'd left it for Kunagisa to repair. There'd been nothing on my wrist while Kanami was memorizing me.

And yet...

On the canvas, there was definitely a watch on my arm.

"Hunh. She drew it wrong?" Kunagisa said, puzzled for a moment. Then she shrugged, and, in a rare move, chose the side of common sense. "Doesn't seem like a big deal to me."

"Maybe not, but..."

"Which?"

"...try using some subjects and objects."

"The watch display. Was it blank? Or were the numbers reversed, like after I fixed it?"

"Oh...no, I mean, I wear it with the display turned to the inside, right? The painting only showed the clasp."

Kunagisa nodded. She thought about it for a minute longer. "Then I really just think it was a mistake," she said. "By the way, Ii-chan. There's something else that's been bothering me. About Akane's murder, or maybe about her headless corpse. Not sure."

"What?"

"Her hands," Kunagisa crooked her head, folding her arms. "Or maybe just her fingers. I feel like there was something really unnatural about them, but...my memory seems to have peaked. Like there's a mosaic in my head covering it. Hikari! Did you notice anything weird?"

"Not really..." Hikari had come back over to us, and she settled down on the carpet next to Kunagisa. "Here. Pen and paper."

"Thanks."

I took the notepad from her, and, with the form we'd made the day before in mind, wrote up all the alibis for the island residents during both Ibuki Kanami and Sonoyama Akane's respective murders.

Ibuki Kanami Murdered

—

Sonoyama Akane Before Earthquake: No
 After Earthquake: No

Murdered

Kunagisa Tomo Before Earthquake: Yes (Ii-chan, Hikari,
Maki, Shinya) After Earthquake: No

 Yes (Unable to
descend stairs alone)

Sashirono Yayoi Before Earthquake: Yes (Ilia, Rei)
 After Earthquake: No

 No (Sleeping)

Chiga Akari Before Earthquake: Maybe (Teruko)
 After Earthquake: No

 Yes (On mainland)

Chiga Hikari Before Earthquake: Yes (Ii-chan, Tomo,

Maki, Shinya

After Earthquake: No

No

Chiga Teruko
269

Before Earthquake: Maybe (Akari)

After Earthquake: No

Yes (On mainland)

Sakaki Shinya
Maki, Hikari)

Before Earthquake: Yes (Ii-chan, Tomo,

After Earthquake: Yes (Maki)

Yes (Maki)

Handa Rei

Before Earthquake: Yes (Ilia, Yayoi)

After Earthquake: Maybe (Ilia)

Maybe (Ilia)

Himena Maki
Hikari, Shinya)

Before Earthquake: Yes (Ii-chan, Tomo,

After Earthquake: Yes (Shinya)

Yes (Shinya)

Akagami Ilia

Before Earthquake: Yes (Rei, Yayoi)

After Earthquake: Maybe (Rei)

Maybe (Rei)

Hmph.

More or less it.

I read it over, and sighed.

"Alibis...not really much use, are they? We've been been avoiding the issue all along, but the moment we start wondering if there's an accomplice, alibis cease to exist. They can just vouch for each other."

Even if they weren't in cahoots, there was a chance someone was being forced to lie, which meant we had to doubt everything anyone said ever.

Not expecting it to be much use, I wrote of up the rest of the facts.

Case 1

Victim: Ibuki Kanami

Situation: Locked Room
Paint River
(Solved)

Time: Night
Believed to be after the earthquake

Other: Headless body
Killer unknown

Case 2

Victim: Sonoyama Akane

Situation: Locked Room
Open window, too high up
(Unsolved)

Time: Between 2 and 9 AM

Other: Headless body

"And the killer remains unknown."

I put the pen down.

"You've forgotten case 3, Ii-chan," Kunagisa protested.

"The Case of Poor Kunagisa."

"Oh, right. Not as dramatic, but a mystery nonetheless."

"Not as dramatic!?! This is far more tragic than any beheading! I'd rather they cut off my head!"

"Okay, okay," I said, and started writing.

Case 3

Victim: Kunagisa Tomo ('s computers)

Situation: Unlocked Room

No lock on the door, anyone could enter.

Time: Between 10 AM and the end of breakfast.

But at that time, all residents were together. Time-locked room?

Other: Purpose of destruction believed to be the photographs of Ibuki Kanami's murder.

"A room locked by time..."

The first locked room was locked by a surface, the paint river. The second was locked by height, the window too high to reach. And the third was locked by time.

"The second dimension, the third dimension, and the fourth dimension..."

"That makes the mystery sound positively cosmological. Hey, Hikari, maybe this is a little late to ask – after all, it would pretty much overturn all our reasoning to date – but is there any chance there's someone else on the island?"

"No," Hikari said. "There's only one place you can even land a boat. We've lived on this island quite a while, so I think we can be pretty sure."

"Okay."

But if that was the case, then it was absolutely impossible for anyone to have smashed Kunagisa's computers. A little intelligence and creativity might get you around the surface and height problems, but no human had yet conquered time.

"There must be some sort of trick, there. Remote Control or something. Hmm. But this is clearly the work of a human."

"Hikari, do you think there's any chance someone could have slipped away during the confusion? I mean, we all just saw a headless body, so we weren't necessarily counting each other. Could be we just overlooked it."

"Well...I just don't *think* so," Hikari said, dubiously. I knew what I'd said just didn't seem likely. If someone had slipped away, we would have noticed.

"Okay. With the first case, *anyone* could do it. There's still the possibility of an accomplice, but here we know the trick, and can't really call it a locked room. Now, the second case...here, we have no idea how the locked room works."

"But only I could have done it," Hikari said.

I nodded. "That leaves the third case. *Nobody* could have done it. There *is no way* for it to have happened."

With each new incident, the difficulty level skyrocketed. I hated to imagine what would come next.

"This is...quite a cycle."

"Hmm. I can't imagine it was intentional, but...it's hard to dismiss it as coincidence."

"Anyway, no point in thinking about it now," I said. "Alibis. Locked Rooms. Tricks. Gimmicks. Traps and fakes. Forget all of that. We just have to assume someone's pulling a job we haven't imagined possible."

"A virtual machine!"

"Right. I think."

I had no idea what she meant.

Mystery writers had long maintained that creating a puzzle was far harder than cracking it, but I found that hard to believe. It was easy to dream up a trick or puzzle. The person who made the puzzle could approach it from any direction they liked, however it was convenient for them to proceed. But the people solving the puzzle had to first find the correct direction.

So we put the problem aside.

"We should at least think about the alibis, though. We don't have much else to work with," Hikari said. "I know this is just an emotional reaction, but...when Ibuki was murdered, the reason we all suspected Sonoyama was because they had obviously hated each other. But look where that got us."

"Yeah...it was really easy to believe Akane would have killed Kanami."

Until Akane was murdered herself.

"What if it was Sonoyama that killed Kanami, and someone else killed Sonoyama to avenge her?"

"Then who seems likely to have killed Akane...? Shinya, maybe. Kanami's assistant, closer to her than anyone."

"But Shinya has an alibi. Even if we ignore that, how did he know Akane was the killer?"

"He didn't need to know; he just needed to convince himself. Mistaken revenge is...if not common, certainly not unheard of. When you think about it, really? Shinya and Maki, giving each other alibis two nights in a row. In the middle of the night. When having an alibi is actually a little suspicious."

"Suspicious...yeah, it's possible that Himena is lying to cover for him. But she doesn't seem the type."

Himena Maki. Fortune teller extraordinaire. Psychic. Able to peer into the hidden depths of the human mind, and listen in on anything happening anywhere in the world. She reminded me of

Kunagisa somehow. Mysterious and...

"What? You in love with Maki, Ii-chan?"

"So funny I forgot to laugh. Maki's pretty crazy; not much point in applying common sense where she's concerned."

This was useless. We were running out of ideas to fruitlessly ponder. Going nowhere fast. Was there even any point in trying?

"...Akane hinted that she knew she was going to be murdered, too."

"Eh?" Hikari said, leaning forward. "What do you mean?"

"She said a few things along those lines, when I was talking to her through the door. She seemed almost...resigned to her fate. I mean, she was quoting Ryokan at me."

"Hunh. Maybe Akane knew who the killer was," Kunagisa suggested, solemnly.

It certainly wasn't unthinkable. Sonoyama Akane was one of the ER3 System's Seven Fools. It seemed entirely plausible that she could have pinpointed the killer without investigating anything.

"So, Hikari...I had a talk with Teruko a few minutes ago."

"Whaaaat!?" Hikari shrieked, as if she could not believe her ears. It was genuinely less like surprise than shock that I would ever tell such an obvious lie. "Teruko? Teruko *spoke*?"

"Yeah, it surprised me too. But I'm more concerned about what she said."

I relayed the gist of what Teruko had told me to Kunagisa and Hikari. I omitted the latter half. I wasn't that much of a masochist.

"So, Hikari...how much of this is true?"

Hikari hesitated for a very long moment. "Um. Well...hmm."

"Akari said something odd this morning as well. 'It's

happening again.' What did she mean by that?"

She fell completely silent, staring at her lap. At last she looked up...and her eyes seemed to track a fly buzzing around my head for a long moment.

"It's all true," she said, at last.

Well.

That was a bit of a shock.

Enough of one that I found myself at a loss for words. All? Of what? What did she mean?

"...at this point, I guess I just have to trust you. You've trusted me," Hikari said. And then hesitated again. When she did speak, she seemed to be choosing her words very carefully. "Legally speaking, Miss Ilia is a criminal. We are well aware of that, but chose to serve her anyway."

"This is why she won't call the police?"

"We simply serve her. Nothing more than that. Since we came to this island...things have happened. That's how we got to know Aikawa..."

Things? *Things*? What kind of things?

Something happened on this island?

Wait...

A couple of days ago, didn't...

"Hey, Tomo."

"What, Ii-chan?"

"Did you say you were interested in something that had happened here? Or is my memory playing tricks on me as usual?"

"It isn't."

"Then you knew?"

Kunagisa grinned. "It's kinda famous. Lots of people know, but nobody talks about it. Nobody wants to piss off the Akagami Foundation."

So Kunagisa's interest was still directed at the same kinds

of things it always had been. Not for the first time, I was faced with proof that five years had not changed her at all.

"Chee-kun mentioned a few things about it, but I figured it was better not to tell you."

"Why?"

"Because you'd react like this."

Couldn't argue with that.

Sheesh.

I flopped back against the side of the bed.

Hikari spoke up again, carefully – no, painfully. "Miss Ilia is a lot calmer since we started the salon. I know why Akari was so upset, but this is our job..."

Her job. If that was true, I respected her for it. No matter what the circumstances, people that lived only to fulfill their role deserved my respect. It was a way of life I could never have managed.

Deep deep deep down, Hikari could separate herself and her work.

"Very well, then."

But in that case, what did that mean? If the killer had known about this, had known that Ilia would never call the police, and with that in mind...

That explained...

...why the killer had been so bold, so haughty, so immodest, and so convinced of success.

"So, Hikari..."

But before I could ask for more details about what, exactly, Ilia had done...there was a knock at the door.

It was Yayoi.

3

She'd slipped away from Maki and Shinya while they ate,

telling them she was going to the bathroom. A banal, cliché lie. Maki had surely read her mind, and even in his condition, Shinya must have seen right through it, but she looked so pale that you could not have called her a liar even if she said she was going to ride a turtle to the island of the *oni*.

She sat on the couch, saying nothing.

But she seemed oddly conscious of Hikari's presence. Maybe she was still worried that Hikari was the killer; I could hardly blame her.

"Since you came to see us, Yayoi, can I assume you have something to tell us?"

She didn't seem likely to speak without prompting.

She nodded weakly. "Um...I heard the two of you were trying to solve the crime."

"That's the plan. It's personal now," I said, glancing at the pile of computers. Of what had been computers. "What about it?"

"To solve the crime, you need correct information."

"Yes, of course."

"If you're tricked by incorrect information, there might be a third incident."

"Fourth!" Kunagisa yelped. We ignored her.

"Possibly, Yayoi. I'm not really sure what you're driving at. I thought you came to help us. Am I wrong? Did you just come here because you're sick of Shinya and Maki?"

"No, nothing like that," Yayoi said, once again looking at Hikari. "I just...I may have lied. A lie I should never have said."

"A lie? Something you said wasn't true?"

"Yes. That evening...I was talking with Ilia. Until the earthquake. That much is absolutely true," Yayoi said. "But...Handa *wasn't there*."

Hikari tensed.

Handa Rei.

Now I knew why Yayoi was worried about speaking in front of Hikari, and knew why she'd been so anxious the last couple of days, why she'd hidden in her room.

The ice had broken.

So that was it.

When we'd exchanged alibis at breakfast that morning, Ilia had told us she'd been with Rei and Yayoi. She'd allowed everyone else to explain for themselves, but when it was Yayoi's turn, she'd spoken first. I'd assumed it was simply because they had been together, but apparently not.

Ilia...

Akagami Ilia had protected Handa Rei.

Yayoi's head was in her hands, her shoulders limp, as if she had just set down a heavy burden.

"Why..."

No, it was not fair to ask her why she had kept quiet. This was Ilia's island, and Ilia's mansion. Ilia owned the place, and Ilia had invited Yayoi here. And Ilia was Akagami Ilia. If Ilia said she was with Yayoi and Rei, then how could she have denied it? How could she call Ilia a liar?

She couldn't.

Nobody could.

"I didn't think it was important at the time," Yayoi said. "Of course Ilia would protect her servants. But...because of that we thought Akane was the only one without an alibi, and locked her up...and then she was murdered."

The words were pouring out of her now. I listening in silence. Kunagisa and Hikari did the same.

"And then last night, again, Ilia said that Rei had an alibi. That they had been together all night. But how can we believe that? She said they were discussing plans, but how can a conversation like that last all night?"

"Dunno. Maybe it did."

"I can't believe it. Once someone has lied, they might be telling the truth the second time, but it is far more likely that they'll have made up a new lie. And, Hikari," Yayoi glared at her. "You are also her servant, but Ilia didn't bother protecting you at all. Why not? She lies for Rei, but not for you? Does she think you don't need her help? Because, say, she knows who the killer is?"

"So you think Rei is the killer?" I said, surprised. I had not expected that conclusion. But Yayoi seemed very serious about it. "Certainly, her alibi no longer stands, assuming we believe you."

"I'm telling the truth. I can't blame you for not believing me, but it's true."

Hikari obviously wanted to say something, but couldn't find the right words. She eventually gave up, and bit her lip, looking very unhappy.

"Give me a minute."

If Rei didn't have an alibi that night, how did that change things? Not that much...but if Ilia had lied, that fact was very important indeed.

Rei was not in Ilia's room that night. Ilia's statement that she and Rei were together after the earthquake was a lie.

That meant...

"Hnya. Yayoi..."

"Yes, Kunagisa?"

"Why do you think Rei's the killer? I mean, Rei is the head maid. Ilia's right hand. She's important. Way closer to Ilia than Hikari is. Maybe that's why she only protected Rei. And telling one lie doesn't mean she must have told a lie the second time. And if you're right, and Rei is the killer, then Ilia would know that, right? Why would she..."

"Maybe Ilia ordered the killings."

Someone swallowed audibly. I'm not sure who. Maybe it was me.

"...I don't think so. Both Kanami and Akane were her guests. She asked them to come here; why would she kill them?"

"She could have called them here *to* kill them," Yayoi insisted. "Ilia calls people here. And then she kills them. Seems more than possible to me."

She meant that Ilia had had Rei kill two people, and would have her kill a third, and a fourth, and then a fifth. As theories went, it was fairly far-fetched, but I didn't have any grounds to reject it out of hand.

Far from it. In fact, I'd just been given some information that supported it. Teruko had done just that, and Hikari had just finished confirming it.

Handa Rei.

The head maid.

Boss to Hikari, Akari, and Teruko; the woman closer to Ilia than anyone else in the world. Well? Was this the answer? Was she where all this lead?

Akagami Ilia.

Her name was derived from the Iliad, by Homer, an ancient Greek poem. The story of the war between Troy and the Greeks over Helen. Every character in the poem believed themselves to be controlled by the gods. If this was the answer...

Yayoi interrupted my thoughts.

"Do you know why we were invited here?"

"Well...you're all geniuses."

"Ha," Yayoi snorted. "Right. Ibuki was a painter. A great artist. Sonoyama was an academic. Fine. Himena is a fortune teller. Can't argue there. Kunagisa's an engineer. How wonderful. But I'm a cook! Ilia is no gourmet, so why invite me? I can't believe anyone would put that much stock in cooking."

I didn't argue. Coming from Yayoi, it didn't seem like my place.

"And do you know why Ibuki and Sonoyama were beheaded?"

"...that's quite a non sequitur."

"Not at all," Yayoi said, absolutely serious. "Eat what ails you. An idea you see in traditional Chinese cooking. If your liver is weak, eat liver. If your stomach is bothering you, eat stomach. To heal any part of your body that is damaged, eat that body part. You understand?"

"Wait, Yayoi..."

This...this idea was...

"And who invited Ibuki and Sonoyama to this island!?" Yayoi shrieked. Her voice tore through the room. My ears were left ringing. But I was way too shaken to care.

This...wait, hold on. Slow down. Was that even...? No, stop. Please, give me a moment to...

"I'll say it again. As many times as I have to. Why did the killer cut off Ibuki and Sonoyama's heads? Why did she take their heads away? Where did she take the heads? And who invited them to this island? Who decided which geniuses to gather here? And what lay inside their missing heads?"

If jewels were missing from the scene of a murder, we would assume the killer wanted jewels. If money was missing, they wanted money. That was common sense, a natural assumption to make.

And in this case, it was the victim's heads that were missing.

"Why were we called here?" Yayoi continued. "Why was a cook like me – not an artist or an academic or a fortune teller or an engineer – invited to this island? Given special treatment, allowed to stay as long as I liked?"

Her voice had faded to a hoarse whisper.

Like she was begging us to help her.

She must have thought this through. Her brain must have been spinning ever since she was forced to lie. Since long before Sonoyama was killed. All that time.

Yayoi looked at Hikari. Once again, her voice rose to a shriek. "What does she want me to do!?"

Someone swallowed aloud again.

This time it was definitely me.

Was this possible? Was her story...her idea...? Was it even an idea a sane mind could invent?

But why now? This salon had hardly started recently. If this was her plan, she would have done it before...

No.

Now. The five geniuses on Wet Wing Raven Island were five of the absolute best in the world. Had Ilia been waiting for an assembly of this level?

"That's impossible!" Hikari cried. It seemed to explode out of her. "Miss Ilia would never do something so awful...so horrible...not any more..."

Not any more.

Not again.

Once.

Things had happened. And were happening again. But not any more. Not again. Don't make waves. Not again. Not again not again, not any more.

Yayoi did not back down.

"I've been watching Handa all this time. Since yesterday morning. You watch anyone for a long enough, you'll see something you have in common with them, get a sense of their humanity, of how they tick. Feel closer to them. 'Oh, they're human, just like I am.' I felt that way about Ilia, certainly. She's

human, like me. Lies, like everyone does. But Handa...she terrifies me. It's like her entire life is a performance, and that makes me so scared."

"She..." Hikari stammered. "She just...well..."

But she found nothing to follow it. She tried. Desperately searched for the words to defend her employer, as her job demanded. It was tragic to watch. So tragic it was almost funny.

"Okay. Yayoi, I understand why you're trying to tell us. You mean to say..."

I tried to step in, put myself between them. But Yayoi would not let up.

"Akari and Teruko went to the mainland to call a detective?" she asked. "Who can prove that? Who is it won't let us call the police? Who won't let us leave the island? Hikari, maybe they just left you out of the loop. Can you prove they haven't? Ilia said you were a suspect. How can you say you're not just a red herring designed to confuse the situation? Or maybe you're part of it, and Ilia put you here to confuse Kunagisa and..."

"Stop, Yayoi," I said, quietly. "Stop insulting my friend. Kunagisa and I do not handle anger well. But we won't hesitate to get angry when anger is called for."

My gaze must have been very cold. Yayoi shivered, and shrank. She looked exactly like she had when she came in. Anxious.

"I'm scared. So scared. Scared. I'm just scared."

"I can see that."

"We're on an island. There's nowhere to run. If I'm right, I might not be killed. You might not be either; you weren't invited, you aren't a genius. But your precious Kunagisa is in danger. God only knows how long before everything above Kunagisa's shoulders is gone. This is no time to relax and cook a great meal. We have to do something. Stop this from happening. I didn't come

here to yell at Hikari. I thought...Kunagisa's an engineer. Maybe she knows how to work a boat. Maybe we could steal one, and escape..."

"Woah..."

I held up a hand, stopping her. She stared at me, confused. Hikari gave me much the same look. Kunagisa alone was staring into the distance, looking a bit stunned. I probably had much the same expression on my face.

Um. Hunh. Why had I interrupted her again?

Wait...

"Say that again."

"...hunh?"

"What you just said. Repeat it?"

"Maybe we can steal a boat?"

"Not that."

"Maybe Kunagisa can work..."

"Not that either."

"Um...I didn't come here...?"

"No, not that. Something jumped out at me, but that isn't it. Before that."

"I don't remember..."

"Then think! What did you say before that!?"

"We have to do something...this is no time to cook?"

"No, no, I know that. We have to do something? That's my damn catch phrase. I know it like the back of my hand, it's useless to me. Just before that, Yayoi."

"...I really can't remember anything else."

"Tomo!" I said, turning to Kunagisa. "You remember, don't you?"

"Mm." Kunagisa nodded. "Everything above my shoulders will be gone."

"Bingo!"

That was it. That had jumped out at me. Why? Because it was a future I did not want to contemplate? No. Too much of a cliché. Definitely not why.

This was it. This was the key to everything.

The Rosetta Stone.

"Um..."

"Quiet! I'm thinking. This is the way out. I'm sure of it. This is easier than the roads in Kyoto or Sapporo. I have a theory and a solution. Now all I need is proof."

I had to think.

Kunagisa was thinking too.

We had all the information we needed. I felt like we did. We'd had everything we needed ages ago. I could well have figured things out the moment Kunagisa's computers were broken. That was the only clue I should have needed. The third case might not be the key, but it was a crucial clue.

And now I had the key.

In my hands at last.

And with the key in my hands, I could open the door. I had almost reached the answer. It was a zero sum game now. There was a guaranteed way to win, like a simple labyrinth.

Kunagisa must be getting close too.

Her mound of sand was almost complete.

"Now, this really is nonsense..."

And.

A moment.

"Is that it...?" I whispered.

But this...

"No way. Can that really be it?"

That couldn't be.

This couldn't be.

How could this be making sense?

No inconsistencies. Coherent, and logically sound. This was the only remaining possibility. There was no more sand to pile up on top.

But it worried me. I just couldn't let it go. It was like that last problem on a test that you've gone over a dozen times but can't lock down. I knew I'd made no mistakes, but that was no comfort at all. I couldn't shake that feeling, couldn't be confident in the answer.

It was just too fucking creepy.

"Tomo...what do you think?"

"Hnya," she grunted. "I think and I think and I can only think one thing. This is why the fingers bothered me. But it just..."

The answer was just as unsettling for her, clearly. Hikari and Yayoi was staring at us like we were Martians. Or maybe Venusians. I didn't much care which.

"But it has to be right," Kunagisa said, bowing before reality faster than I could. "I can't think of anything else, so it has to be right."

"Yeah. When only one possibility remains, so matter how improbable it may seem, it has to be the truth."

We'd come down to selective thinking in the end. Akane would have been mad at us, but who cared about that now. As long as we believed these murders to be the work of a single killer, there was only one possible answer. And that answer had a 100% probability of being right.

Okay.

I had to accept it.

I didn't like it at all, but this was reality, and that was the truth.

Everything else was sentimental nonsense.

"You accept it now, Ii-chan?" Kunagisa asked. "So...what do we do?"

"Do? Too much room here, so," I thought again. I was better at this kind of thinking than Kunagisa was. I may not be much good at shogi, but I was good at shogi puzzles. "Okay. Yayoi, Hikari, we'll need your help."

"Hunh?" they chorused – a beautiful duet.

I stood up.

"We finally survived the top of the first inning. Lots of points scored on us, but it's not quite a called game yet. Just got our third out. Time for the bottom of the inning, and our counterattack."

"Up first is Yayoi on first, followed by Hikari in center field, then me as catcher, and the clean-up hitter's our pitcher, Ii-chan."

Kunagisa jumped down off the bed, smiling like the clear blue sky.

"He's gonna hit a grand slam."

Day 5 (3) Wet Wing Raven

Sashirono Yayoi - Genius – Cook

Finish her.

Apropos of nothing.

Wet Wing Raven in Russian apparently means "deepest despair." To use a rather romantic turn of phrase, perhaps this island was the gathering point for people in the depths of that very despair. Just as the opposite of love was not hate but indifference, the opposite of hope is not despair. Absolute apathy, not caring about anything – that's the opposite of hope. The ability to forgive anything, the ability to say, "Fine," to absolutely anything at all – is the opposite of hope.

If you have everything, you don't need anything.

Once everything has been made equal, what is left?

You could claim it was the ultimate resting place of any and all emotions. Which of us has not looked to that place with envy and longing? Beyond the tides of non-interference. At the back of taboo, proud to have tied reality to an equals sign, a place maintaining a nigh-fleeting density.

Much must be sacrificed to get there. And only one-way tickets with no guarantees were available.

And yet.

Even then.

People made it.

By accident?

Or by design.

Ibuki Kanami. Sonoyama Akane. Sashirono Yayoi.
Himena Maki.

Akagami Ilia, Chiga Akari, Chiga Hikari, Chiga Teruko,
Handa Rei.

And Kunagisa Tomo.

This is really nothing but stupid sentiment. Tedious.

Meaningless. Nothing but nonsense. And the worst of it is, there's more nonsense to come.

How big a clown was it possible for me to be?

"Have you figured something out?"

Gathered for dinner on the fifth day.

Teruko was absent, working somewhere, but the remaining nine of us were in our seats. Nine. Two days before there had been twelve.

"Must I ask again?" Ilia said. "Kunagisa, I know you have been investigating. What have you figured out?"

She seemed to be enjoying this immensely.

She probably was.

Of course she was.

She, too, lived in a world of her own. This island, Wet Wing Raven Island, was her world.

"Should I ask again?"

"We haven't figured out a single, solitary thing," I said.

"Got a problem with that?"

"No. After all, that is why we have experts!" Ilia said, brightly. "I suppose we had better remain in teams for another three days, then."

"Three days?" Shinya said. "You really do put a lot of stock in this detective. What's Aikawa like? How did you two meet?"

"The second question, I'm afraid, is personal," Ilia said.

"But I shall try to answer the first question. Aikawa is...well...terrifying. After all, we are talking about humanity's strongest consultant. Very, very intelligent, though; this case will be solved in no time at all. I'm quite looking forward to it."

A great detective.

Solving the case before the detective even got here was

probably failing my role as a supporting character. For a moment I regretted doing so, but my life was on the line here, and the situation was what it was. I couldn't just sit around and wait for the hero to arrive. It was Aikawa's fault for getting here late.

Maki cackled next to me.

She seemed to be enjoying herself as well. Had she read my mind? Or had she just seen the farce to come, and laughed at that? Probably both, but I imagined there was more to her laugh than either. She laughed at all the world, and all the truths in it.

Perhaps I should respect that.

I turned my attention elsewhere.

"Aikawa will be here three days from now, at noon, or even earlier. And then..."

Ilia was still going on when suddenly someone shrieked, "Enough!" and sent plates flying in all directions.

It was Yayoi.

She had stood up, grabbed the tablecloth, and yanked. Plates overturned, food spilled, crockery shattered. The commotion was deafening.

"Enough!" she yelled, slamming her hand into the table.

"Sashirono!" Hikari said, and took her shoulder, trying to calm her down. Yayoi shoved her away.

"What is wrong with you people? I can't stand any more of this! Detectives? Locked rooms? Beheadedings? This isn't a mystery novel! People have died! Why can you all sit here eating and talking? Don't eat my food and talk about this bullshit! You're all insane! Don't you even care that people have died? Doesn't that make you sick? When did death become *novel*?"

"Sashirono," Hikari said, getting up. "Calm down!"

"You killed them!" Yayoi shrieked. "It's obvious! Everyone knows! You had the only key! You went to see Sonoyama in the middle of the night and you murdered her! I bet

you killed Ibuki too!"

"There is no proof of that," I said. "You should not say things like that without proof, Yayoi. There's no evidence Hikari killed anyone."

"Evidence? I don't give a damn about evidence!"

"But Hikari has no reason to kill either of them."

"Like we could possibly understand the reasoning of a psychopath who goes around chopping people's heads off! Some ritual or whatever, summoning a god, who knows! I hate it! I hate it, I hate it, I hate it! Stay back! You might cut off my head next! I won't let that happen!"

"Yayoi, calm down."

"I'm perfectly calm! I'm the only sane one here! You've all lost your minds! It's disgusting! I can't stand it any more! Sitting around debating the facts of the case...I can't even talk to you! What language are you people speaking? Detectives? Locked Rooms? Beheadings? What are these words? We don't have them on *earth*. I'm going home. Leaving this insane island. I'm through with the lot of you!"

She hit the table again.

"I can't trust any of you. I'm going to hide in my room. I'm gonna barricade the door so no one can get in. Come get me when you're ready to let me leave this place. Until then, leave me alone! Don't ever speak to me again!"

And with that, she spun around and headed for the door.

Hikari called after her one more time, but she never looked back. Soon she was out of sight.

There was an long, awkward silence.

At last, Ilia broke it. "Golly," she said. "And she was so polite! I'm surprised to see her crack under the pressure. Poor thing."

She sighed.

"Aikawa's coming soon, so we can't really let a suspect leave. Hikari, this is your fault, so you go talk to her."

"Of course," Hikari said, bowing her head.

"And dinner is ruined! Akari, can you make something else quick? Honestly, where is keeping Teruko? At a time like this."

Like Ilia said, dinner had certainly been ruined, but to sell the performance, this was necessary expenses. It wasn't my money anyway; while I did not approve of wasting food, it wasn't me that wasted it. Yayoi did, and she'd made it.

Kunagisa was looking sadly at the plate on the floor at her feet. Not the food, but the plate, which was white. Perhaps it reminded her of her broken computers.

"Okay, catcher."

"Hnya?" she said looking at me. "What, Ii-chan?"

"I'm about to make my move. You're in charge here."

She nodded.

I stood up, and headed for the door.

I could hear argument breaking out behind me. When I looked over my shoulder, Kunagisa had jumped up on the table, and delivered a body blow to Shinya. I was a little jealous, but I'd live.

And...

I couldn't exactly take Kunagisa with me.

With one eye closed, I ran down the hall, up the stairs, and as I neared Yayoi's room I finally saw her. She was leaning against the wall, looking lost.

She turned as I approached, and looked relieved to see me.

"How was that?"

"A beautiful performance."

"Performance? At least half of it was real," she started walking alongside me. "But is it really true? Is she really the

killer?"

"You checked it yourself."

"The scent checked out, but...I'm not that confident in my sense of smell. I'm not a dog, or anything."

"Close enough."

"Not a compliment."

"Yeah, Kanami said the same thing. Metaphors and similes are never complimentary."

Of course, Yayoi was hardly the only girl who'd resent being compared to a dog. I apologized.

We reached Yayoi's door.

"What now?"

"You go back to the dining room. It's dangerous here."

"....so why is it you insist on putting yourself in danger?" she asked. "There are other ways, surely. Forgive me if I'm wrong, but it seems like you always give yourself the most dangerous role."

"....."

"If the world is made up of people who die from eating too much, and people who die of starvation, there are far more of the former. You seem more like the latter type."

"You're overestimating me."

"It's not a compliment."

And with that, she went back the way she'd come.

"Dangerous, hunh?" I muttered. I knew that. I was doing this in full knowledge of the danger. Maybe I was the type to starve.

True nonsense.

I slowly, carefully opened the door to Yayoi's room.

It was dark inside. Before my eyes got used to it...

...I took a step in.

A moment later...

There was a whistle.

I dove forward, sliding into the room. On one knee, I opened my closed eye. Now I could make out just a bit of my surroundings.

The figure at the door closed it behind her. I could see her face clearly, and I knew my answer had been right. She looked a bit surprised to see me. But that didn't stop her swinging the axe – an axe! – in my direction.

She said nothing.

Not a word.

I took a breath, and stood up.

Despite laying this trap, I'd not needed to be this acrobatic in a while. I wasn't a bad acrobat, but I hadn't worked out since I came back to Japan a few months ago.

She moved quickly, realizing she needed to end this fast. She took several quick steps in my direction. Once Kunagisa had taken care of Shinya, it was only a matter of time before someone came to help me. There was no need for me to try to end things fast. In fact, running away might be my best option, but she was between me and the door.

I'd better focus on avoiding her attacks. A typical plan for me, maybe a bit too typical, and not very effective. I was too focused on the axe, and lost track of my feet.

She feinted with the axe, and then tripped me. It worked like a charm. My back slammed hard into the carpet, and she pinned my shoulders to the ground, straddling me.

The fight was pretty much over by this point. Maybe I should have run a marathon that morning, not taken a walk. Or maybe kept in training since I got back to Japan.

"Uh-oh."

Oh well. It wouldn't matter much if I got killed here. Kunagisa would be explaining the truth now, and Yayoi was

almost back in the dining room. She'd never get away with it. I'd lost the fight, I'd lost the contest, but I had not lost the game.

I was fine with this.

She had an axe.

And that axe...

"Die," she snarled. Definitely her voice.

I'd given up so easily.

Is this what it felt like?

Why? Why had I given up on living like this?

Didn't I want to live?

I didn't want to die, but I didn't really want to live, either.

Living was a pain, but going out of my way to die seemed like a waste as well.

Did I have nothing I valued, nothing I wanted, nothing I had to protect? Was that why I was so ready to give up?

"No."

That wasn't it.

Dying here caused problems for no one. Not even Kunagisa.

Maki.

Did you know this would happen? Thank you for not warning me. Now I knew why she had said nothing, despite knowing exactly what was happening all along.

When it's your time to die, die.

I wasn't to that point yet.

Certainly.

But like Teruko said, it was probably a good idea for me to die once. Really.

Man, this axe sure was taking a long time to fall. She'd swung it up above her head, but it was still up there. That seemed weird, so I looked closer. The expression on her face was not sadistic victory, or a mocking smirk – instead, she had a look of

desperation, as she struggled to swing the axe.

"You don't close your eyes."

Someone else was here!

Not the woman on top of me. I couldn't see her from here, but there was a third person in the room, holding the axe in place.

Who? Did Yayoi come back? Or had Kunagisa caught up with me? Neither seemed likely.

The third person wrestled the axe out of the killer's hands, and as they did so, they unleashed a beautiful, magnificent kick to the killer's side. The killer was knocked sideways into the couch. She got up quickly, and turned to face the newcomer.

I was only a spectator now.

For some reason, the third person chose to toss the axe aside. You'd think it would be a perfect weapon to fight the killer with – was she playing fair? At a time like this?

The killer made no sudden movements this time – obviously aware this new opponent was more dangerous than me. But she was also working on a time limit. If she didn't finish us off soon, Kunagisa would finish explaining, and everyone would come pouring in here.

And the third party did not make the same mistake I had. Her foot hit the floor and she covered the two meters between her and the killer in a single step, swinging her fist forward. This was a karate technique, using her momentum to add force to the punch. Where most would dodge backwards or to the side, the killer twisted her body just enough to avoid the punch, and get in close. She reached for the newcomer's throat, but the newcomer didn't even try to dodge; she just thrust her other fist forward. Since the killer was moving forward to attack, she had no time to avoid this second punch, and it hit her right above the heart.

She grunted, but did not release the newcomer's throat. In a flowing, graceful move she slid past the newcomer, and kicked

backwards, striking her calf.

The newcomer's legs left the ground.

From here, the killer must have intended to slam her into the ground – I was sure she'd won. But that never happened. The newcomer used the killer's arm as a support beam, transitioning into a sort of handstand, maneuvering in mid-air so that, by the time they both crashed to the floor, she had the killer's arm in a lock. Some sort of advanced judo grappling technique.

A second later...

The sound of a bone breaking. An oddly soft, wimpy sort of snap.

The newcomer released the arm and stood up. The killer stood up as well, but before she made it to her feet the newcomer kicked her hard, in the broken arm. The killer fell over the back of couch. Something glass fell off a nearby table, breaking.

The newcomer struck a kata, not out of breath at all.

The fight was over.

I could not believe my eyes.

At last, the newcomer looked down at me, and said, without smiling, "You should really close your eyes when you're about to die."

I let my head slump back to the ground. "I thought you said I should try dying once."

"Oh, that..." she crooked her head. "Was a lie."

Teruko.

I shook my head, and held out my hand. I thought the odds were around fifty fifty, but Teruko did actually take it and help me up.

"Why are you here?"

"No reason. It was simply inevitable."

"What are you talking about?"

"Never mind. Just nonsense."

That...

That was my line.

Again.

"Thank you."

Teruko let go of my hand the moment I was on my feet.
When she looked at me, her eyes still did not focus on me.

"No need. More importantly..."

A moment's pause.

"There's something that's been bothering me."

"What?"

This sounded important. What was she about to say? I
couldn't begin to guess.

It was dark.

My eyes were used to the dark.

But I still could not read her expression.

Any more than I could my own heart.

Any more than I could the hearts of strangers.

"The question you asked this afternoon," she said. Same
monotone, same cold, blank stare. "I know that was only a
metaphor...but was it Kunagisa? Or was it *you*?"

The child locked in the basement.

No human contact for ten years.

"Oh," I said.

Once again, for no reason at all, I tried to touch Teruko's
hand.

Trying to answer her question.

For a moment, our fingers touched.

And the moment they did.

There was an ear-splitting sound.

A shockwave ran up my body.

Teruko toppled slowly towards me.

I caught her in my arms. Supporting her full weight. She

was as light and soft and warm as she looked, but I had no time to enjoy the sensation. My gaze was drawn to the back of the couch.

Or more accurately...

To the woman with a gun.

Standing behind it.

Aiming right at us.

A black gun, a fairly popular silhouette. I'd seen it before, but never here, never in Japan.

She had a Glock.

But it was certainly not a surprise that she could have obtained one. The question was more...why had she not used it until now? But even then, the answer was obvious. No matter how large the mansion might be, it wasn't big enough to muffle a gunshot. This was the ace in her sleeve. Her last resort, the weapon she had intended to avoid using at all costs.

But...

But she had used it. Which meant I'd won. I still had my ace. Maybe only because I'd blown my chance to play it. But this was the final hand.

".... —"

Or the encore of it.

A do-over, a make-up for the last scene.

"— , — ."

Her voice.

Speaking calmly.

The gun...

...pointed at my face.

" —" she said. "

She said something.

I could tell that much.

But the gunshot had destroyed my ear drums, and I couldn't make out a sound. No, my ear drums were probably fine,

just temporarily paralyzed. But it made no real difference. I didn't think she planned to wait until I could hear again.

I wonder what she said.

This is check mate.

Good bye.

Idiot.

What were you up to?

So this is where you die.

What was the point of your life?

She might well have said any of those things. Or nothing at all.

Either way, I couldn't hear a word of it.

She might as well have said nothing at all.

I...

Just stared at her.

Over Teruko's shoulder...

Beyond the barrel of the gun...

At her.

"...ah."

So.

So this was it.

I wasn't naive enough to believe someone would come and save me in the nick of time. I had known it would end up like this. It was a shame Teruko had to get mixed up in it, but still, this was what I'd planned.

I'd planned only one thing.

To keep Kunagisa out of this.

Nothing else mattered.

Nothing at all.

Apathy. Disinterest.

No future.

No past.

I'd long ago forgotten being born.
I'd never known what it felt like to be alive.
Reality was a synonym for illusion; it could never be the
opposite of 'dream.'

Already...

Teruko's body leaning against me. My ankle, throbbing.
My thoughts paralyzed. My values shattering. My logic melting.
My morals crumbling. Kanami's head. Akane's head. The truth.
The culprit. The murderer. The killer.

Tearing everything apart.

But nothing mattered now.

I forgave everything.

So...

...pull that trigger.

And finish this.

The click...

Of the hammer.

I'd heard that so often overseas.

And at last.

Here...

"Ii-chan!"

The door slammed open.

Light gushed into the room, and for a moment, my eyes
stopped working. But I didn't need to see to know who that was.
Her voice had reached me even though my deafened ears.

But that...

...did not make easier to believe.

Kunagisa Tomo was standing there...alone.

No way. Impossible. I had left her down stairs because she
couldn't come up here. Kunagisa couldn't climb stairs on her own,

which is how I knew she'd be safe down stairs. She had no way of getting up here alone.

But here she was. All alone.

Tears in her eyes.

Looking absolutely exhausted.

Barely able to catch her breath.

Clutching her chest.

Barely able to stop herself from collapsing.

Here alone.

"...you..."

W...wait. This can't be. Someone was with you. Someone must have been with you, or could have never have climbed the spiral staircase. You might have made it a step or two, but then...

This was impossible.

But...

Impossible though it was...

...had she still come here alone?

All the way here?

I suppose it wasn't physically impossible. But compulsions weren't that easily overcome. Sheer willpower could not do a thing. I knew from experience just how hard it was to do what your subconscious rejected.

And yet...

When Kunagisa...

...heard the gun.

Even though it must have been horrifically difficult, even though it might well have actually killed her, she had forced herself up the stairs.

Forgetting all notions of getting someone to help her.

Trying not to throw up. Clutching her heart.

Standing on trembling legs. Cracking a whip on her terrified soul.

Her mind too fragile to live.
Past pain like infinite hell.
She came for me.
Not caring how, no matter what.
Kunagisa Tomo.
For me.
"Why?"
Strangling me.
It hurt, mercilessly.
How big a clown was I?
This feeling...
This painful feeling...
What was it called?
"Why do you..."
Why do you always, always, always...
...put me through the blender?
You really...
...haven't changed.
At all.

And then...
She turned the gun away from me.
Turned it towards Kunagisa.
"No...!"

What are you doing? You're supposed to shoot me! Why would you point it at her? There's no need for that! There's no reason for that at all! Or did you not need a reason? Did reasons not have any bearing on reality, on the cold, harsh, unfeeling real world?

The light.

My eyes were getting used to it now. She must be as well. It was easy to adjust to the light. We could adjust to the light

much faster than Kunagisa could to the dark. She still couldn't see us. Not yet. If she pulled the trigger, Kunagisa would never be able to dodge.

I sat up.

But it was too late for me to stand. There was no point. I could never make it to Kunagisa in time. I could never hope to move faster than a bullet. Even if I somehow managed that, there would be no point. I couldn't let myself die in front of Kunagisa. It was too late. Like five years ago, it was all too late. It was always too late.

Then.

Then all I could do...

"Ah!"

Kunagisa found me. She never saw the gun, she never saw the killer. Kunagisa pointed at me, and smiled.

"Good! You're safe, Ii-chan."

That smile.

A smile that hid nothing.

An open, sunny smile.

Kunagisa Tomo did not have any idea what was happening.

And I...

I really...

"I love her."

Yes.

I had known that all along.

I had not needed the words. They were too clear. Kunagisa and I did not need to make that clear.

We already knew.
I had known this all along.
Since the moment I met her.
I chose Kunagisa Tomo.
And nothing else would ever matter again.
I...
...didn't care if she loved me, didn't care if she chose me.
"So please. Don't."

I begged.

For a long moment, she didn't move.
Then...she began to laugh.
She spun the gun, pointing it at the ground.
And laughed, loud and long.
Like she was really having a great time.
Her laughter like a song.
Dragging my leg, I went over to Kunagisa, and put my
arms round her shoulders. Her entire body was hot to the touch.
That alone proved just how hard it had been for her to come here.
I hugged her to me protectively, and looked back at the killer.
She was watching us.
Gazing at our embrace.
"Well, not everything I'd hoped for," she said.
Speaking at last.
"But for a man like you to admit something like that...I
guess that's enough for one day."
And...
"That's something you wouldn't admit last night."
The killer...
Sonoyama Akane smirked at me, and tossed her gun away.

"Jeez, look at the bruise, Ii-chan!" Kunagisa said. She had rolled my pant leg up, and was rubbing my ankle. Every time she touched it hurt, but the blue-haired one didn't seem to know that. Hikari brought me a wet cloth, so I put that on it. I could feel my ankle getting colder.

It felt good.

"Akane was *really* strong! Not that she looked weak or anything," Kunagisa said. "But Ii-chan, you had no idea?"

"How could I? The Seven Fools are not exactly known for physical prowess. Not like this is a video game."

I had totally underestimated her. I had never imagined she would be that ridiculous, and never dreamed she would be packing heat. I'd had my share of near death experiences, but this had been the closest yet.

"If Teruko hadn't come to save me, I'd have been done for."

"You be more careful. You belong to me, you know."

"I never agreed to that!"

Somewhat against my will, it had been decided that the first thing we needed to do was treat the wounded. I tried to tell them it wasn't that bad, but the damage sustained when Akane tripped me was proving far worse than I had initially believed, and we were now in Kunagisa's room, trying to ease the swelling.

"You hit your back, too...that must have hurt," Hikari said.

"You should have been more careful. Akane was on the karate team in high school, you know."

"Now that you mention it, I think she said something along those lines..."

"She went all the way to the nationals."

Would have been good to know ahead of time.

"Well, she only won five matches."

"...most grand champions are decided after five matches."

Meanwhile, Akane had her broken arm, and the first kick had also broken four ribs. This obviously amounted to some pretty severe injuries. It was amazing she'd still managed to stand up.

Akari and Teruko were treating her.

And, of course, Teruko...when Akane grabbed her throat, her nails had dug in, drawing a little blood, but she was otherwise more or less uninjured. When the gun went off, I thought she'd been shot in the back, but apparently the bullet didn't hit her at all. When she collapsed into my arms, I thought it was because she'd been hit, but apparently she'd been throwing herself out of the way. She'd heard the sound of the hammer drawing back, and was already moving by the time the gun fired.

Charlie called, he's missing an angel.

And then she went and pretended she was dead.

"Well, not quite," Hikari said, defensively. "Teruko was shielding you."

"Shielding me?" I supposed she had placed herself between me and Akane, but... "You mean she risked her life to save me?"

"Not all that much risk. Teruko's apron dress is bulletproof."

"Bulletproof!?"

Less an angel than a warrior maid.

Where had reality gone?

"Yes, Spectra fibers are sewn onto the back of her clothes. Unlike Kevlar, you can shoot Spectra any number of times without weakening the defensive capabilities. And it's thin, so it isn't as hot. Teruko's invincible at short range, so she takes particular care with long range defensive strategies. That apron dress has a particularly long skirt, right? Like aikido hakama. Very useful."

I had assumed she was joking, but I was growing steadily less sure. Perhaps I should just ignore it. "I didn't know Teruko was so strong. Are you that strong too, Hikari?" I asked, backing up a bit.

"No...Teruko is primarily Miss Ilia's CPO. She plays a very different role from the two of us. I mean, have you ever seen her working with me and Akari?"

Hikari and Akari did seem to do all the work around here. I should have noticed. I was in the ER3 Program, after all. In hindsight, it seemed obvious.

"But I am surprised she saved you. I'm sure you noticed, but she's not the caring type. Saving you is one thing, but actually putting herself between you and the gun? The mind boggles."

"Tell me about it. Any idea why?"

Hikari shrugged. "A whim?"

Whims seemed to decide a lot around here.

But I felt like I had an idea. I still couldn't begin to understand what was going on in Teruko's head, but just as she baffled me, I must baffle her.

So I was pretty sure...

Teruko had just...

...wanted to ask that question.

"Such nonsense."

Come to think of it, when Teruko grabbed my arm, she had seemed really strong. I had not expected that to be foreshadowing.

"Is your back okay? Did you hit your head at all? Okay, then you're all done."

Hikari began giving my back a massage. I was in heaven.

"I supposed we'd better go down to the dining room."

HELL.

Right. Everyone not wounded was sitting down there

waiting for Kunagisa and me to come back.

Sitting there in disbelief.

In fear.

"Tomo, you go alone. My injuries are worse than I feared.
I don't think I can make it."

"Okay, but...Ii-chan, this is a great chance to show Akari what you can do. Play your cards right and she'll be yours!"

"....."

"Oh, did you have a thing for Akari? She likes smart people, I think."

The two of them grinned at me like gossipy junior high school girls.

"You know I hate this sort of thing, Tomo! Why should I bother explaining things? They can work it out for themselves."

"Ii-chan, didn't you ever have to give a presentation in the program?"

"I did, and it was pure hell every time. And then the comments were always, "Too roundabout," "Too subjective," or "I don't care what you were worried about." Okay, okay. I'll do it."

Kunagisa laughed.

"Not like that! Not all sulky. You got to be more upbeat! Not that you ever have been, Ii-chan. Let's go. But first, do my hair."

"Mm? You don't like the mini-braids?"

"It feels like someone's pulling my hair. Just one or two is better."

"But it's so cute!"

"Can I do it, Tomo?" Hikari asked.

Kunagisa shook her head. "Putting my hair up is Ii-chan's job."

Sighing, I let the little braids out, and put her hair in a single big braid.

And then we were ready.

"Let's get it over with."

The doors to hell slowly opened. My feet felt heavy, and not just because I was injured.

"Nonsense, right?" I muttered.

We reached the dining room. Everyone was here. Everyone but Sonoyama Akane, who was in bed, recovering.

Everyone including Shinya.

Shinya calmly watched us come in, as if he'd given up, as if a weight had fallen from his shoulders.

Maki grinned at me. I thought she was going to mock me again, but she said nothing.

The table was heaping with the food Yayoi had made while we were tending to my ankle. The relief must have lent wind to her sails, for this was by far the most impressive spread yet.

Akari was still awkwardly avoiding my gaze. There was a bandage wrapped around Teruko's neck.

Rei sat quietly, watching everyone.

And Akagami Ilia...

...was glaring at me, a challenge in her eyes.

"Well, shall we begin?" she said, the moment I sat down.

"What is going on?"

"I will explain. Sonoyama Akane is the killer, and she had help from Ibuki Kanami's assistant, Sakaki Shinya."

Silence.

"...so?"

"That's all."

"Make it last at least half an hour," Ilia demanded. "Explain in detail. Beginning with why Sonoyama was there at all."

"Oh, that's easy. Yayoi went running out of the room,

right? Knowing she would be alone, Akane waited for her in her room. To kill her."

I had intended to take her down, but wound up nearly dying myself before Teruko saved me. And even then, we wound up throwing ourselves on Akane's mercy.

The axe she'd swung at me...

Had been used to chop off someone's head.

"Thank you, Teruko."

"That's not what I meant," Ilia said. "You know what I mean, don't you? Wasn't Sonoyama murdered? In the store room?"

"As you saw for yourself, not so much." I shrugged. "Assuming she doesn't have a twin sister, we can safely assume that Akane is alive and well."

"And the body in the store room?"

"Since Akane is alive, that body was certainly not her. Logical deduction."

"So it was someone else?"

"If the body has been beheaded, assume someone is switching places. Iron rule of mystery novels. I'm sure your beloved detective would say the same thing."

Ilia did not seem to catch my drift at all.

"Um, wait. Let me think this through." At least she intended to try and figure it out. I was a little impressed.

"While you do, may I ask a question?" Shinya said, raising his hand.

"Go ahead," I said. I assumed he was going to ask when I'd figured it out, or how I'd known who it was, but his actual question caught me by surprise.

"Is your leg okay?"

"...yes, just a little swollen."

"So she didn't break it?" Shinya stared at his hands,

mumbling to himself. "Or maybe she couldn't. Doesn't seem like her. Or maybe it is..."

I wasn't sure what he meant.

"I give up," Ilia said, at last. "I can't figure out a thing. Was it really just a trick?"

"Yes. She switched places. You remember when Kunagisa's computers were broken? The third case. That was *impossible*. None of us could have done it. We were all together, and could all vouch for each other – there was no wiggle room for false alibis or accomplices. We had all been watching each other the entire time. Nobody could have broken her computers. At least, none of us could. It must have been someone who *wasn't there*. Logical deduction."

"I understand that much," Ilia said. "And you don't need to keep saying 'logical deduction' like that, you snide little man. What I want to know is, whose body was that in the store room? We were all there. There was no one for Sonoyama to have switched places with. It doesn't make sense."

"I can see why you'd say that," I said, and decided it would be easier to explain with an analogy. "Have you ever seen this puzzle before? It's less of a puzzle, and more of a trick, really..."

I took the alibi chart out of my pocket, and put it face down on the table. First I drew a rectangle, and then I drew nine lines across it. Creating ten tiny rectangles.

"What is that?" Ilia said. "What does it have to do with anything?"

"Imagine these are phone booths. Ten phone booths. But we can fit eleven people in them."

"What's a phone booth?"

"Um. Just a box, then. A small room."

"Ten rooms?"

I nodded.

I'd read about this trick in a bookstore when I was a kid.

"So Mr. A tries to get in the first room. But Person 2 is already in there." I drew an X on the first box. "Likewise, Person 3." I drew an X on the next box. "Person 4." Another X. "5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10." Ten people in the rooms. But there's one room left over. Let's put Mr. A in there."

I drew an X on the last box.

"Now there are eleven people in ten boxes. See?"

"That's stupid," Ilia said. "The first person didn't go in one of the rooms. You just moved the numbers off by one."

"Yes. Exactly. A very simple trick, easily detected with a second's thought. But if you do it snappily, you'd be surprised how many people don't notice."

"They'd notice."

"Not really. We didn't."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. What does this have to do with anything? I'm asking who the body in the store room was. We were all there. There's one too few people. Or was there a thirteenth person on this island?"

"Of course not. There were only ever twelve. That much is certain."

"Then who was it?"

"There are eleven people alive in this mansion. Akagami Ilia, Chiga Akari, Chiga Hikari, Chiga Teruko, Handa Rei, Himena Maki, Sashirono Yayoi, Kunagisa Tomo, Sakaki Shinya, and Sonoyama Akane. And me. That leaves only one possibility."

I paused dramatically.

"Ibuki Kanami."

3

"Since her body was buried in a sleeping bag, there was no dirt on it. We left Shinya alone out there, and went inside, while

he dug her up again. He took her over to the window outside the storeroom. Knocked on the window, Akane opened it, and he dropped the body inside. And Akane switched places with it. That's all there was to it."

I looked around to gauge reactions, particularly Shinya's.

"I thought it was strange at the time. When we went to bury Kanami, Shinya produced a sleeping bag like this was the most normal thing in the world. A make-shift coffin. But wait, why would he have a sleeping bag? If we were camping, yeah, but who brings a sleeping bag to a mansion? [322] Or was it in the mansion to begin with? I assumed it must have been. Ilia had given it to him to bury Kanami. It seemed unlikely that a place this fancy, the kind of place that had canopies on all the beds, would have something like a sleeping bag, but it was hardly impossible. So I accepted it. But the second time, with Akane's body – which was actually Kanami again – Hikari brought a stretcher. Why would you offer a sleeping bag for the first body, and a stretcher for the second? No reason I could see. If there was one, Hikari would have mentioned it. So my former idea fell apart. This mansion had never had a sleeping bag. Shinya must have brought it himself. Even though he wasn't camping. Like he knew he would need a coffin, some way to keep the body clean."

"So he could...reuse the headless body?"

"Yes. Exactly. Akane and Shinya used their first victim to create the illusion of a second murder. That's all there was to it."

"But there was blood in the store room," Ilia said. "If the body was a day old, it would never have bled."

"How could we know if the blood was Akane's? The police could; if the police came this mystery would have never been a mystery at all. But Ilia doesn't like police, and would never call them. Akane must have known this would happen. She knew Ilia would never call the police, could never call the police. She

knew the police would not show up no matter what they did here. Her plan depended on it. The blood stains...well, there's plenty of ways to get blood. Get it from a blood bank. Use animal blood. You'd have to ask her or Shinya."

Shinya showed no signs of volunteering the information. I didn't press it.

"The police would also have been able to tell that the body was a day old. But we're no experts. We can only tell if someone's dead or alive. A week later, yeah, we'd notice; if it was summer and the body started rotting quickly, maybe, but not this time of year, not with the cherry trees in bloom."

"They put the body in her clothes?"

"Yes. She called Hikari to her room to make sure she knew what Akane had been wearing before she was 'murdered.' When Hikari visited the room, Kanami's body was already in there. The door opens inwards, so it was easy to hide the body behind the door. If Akane stood in the doorway, Hikari would have no reason to step inside. It was still pretty risky. If any part of this qualified as nerve-wracking, it must have been that moment. But it was a necessary risk. It was the clothes that made us so certain Kanami's body belonged to Akane. And it placed the time of the murder at night, when her accomplice had an airtight alibi."

Shinya had spent the night drinking with Maki. Maki had invited him, but if she hadn't, Shinya would undoubtedly have invited her. Or even someone else. But it was in the past, so no point in speculating.

"This is why she broke Kunagisa's computers. We'd stored images of Kanami's body we'd taken with a digital camera on them. If we compared those images to the body in the store room, there was a chance we'd notice they were the same."

"Because they were," Kunagisa said. "Something about

the bodies was bothering me; the hands, particularly the fingers. I couldn't quite figure it out. But there was no way Kanami and Akane had the *same fingerprints*."

Kunagisa sighed. It had come as quite a blow that she hadn't noticed immediately. Everyone else might think she was joking, but I knew she meant every word.

Amazing.

"But why would she...?"

"So many possible reasons. But I'd be willing to bet she wanted to no longer exist. Akane used one body twice to create a fake thirteenth person, and successfully removed herself from the picture. There were plenty of places to hide. The mansion is huge, with plenty of unlocked rooms. And she could even go outside."

"But why would she want to hide herself?"

"Not even worth thinking about. Not even worth thinking about. If she was a victim, if she was murdered, we'd no longer be on our guard against her. She'd be like the invisible man; she could flee beyond the reach of our thoughts and deductions. That way, it was easy for her to destroy Kunagisa's computers, and it would have been easy for her to pull off a fourth crime, to kill someone else. Again, we'd have to ask Akane or Shinya about..."

"She was going to kill everybody," Shinya said.

He'd given up on everything. His voice was indifferent. Listless.

"Everyone here. But to do that, she had to take herself out of the group. She knew you'd eventually start moving in teams, and she'd have her hands tied. She had to slip away before that happened."

And once outside the group, she could pick us off one by one, every time a target presented itself. Shinya chuckled, softly. "Akane made it out so easily. I can't believe she never managed to kill anyone else. I thought she'd at least get through half of you."

"Do you want to explain the rest?"

"No," Shinya said, shaking his head. "You do it. That's your role here. Your job."

I nodded. "So, the first locked room...I don't need to explain this, do I? It was nothing but a distraction. All she needed was to buy enough time to pull off the second case. It was less a planned crime than a coincidence relying on the law of large numbers. She probably came up with it on the spot after the earthquake. She'd planned to kill Kanami, but hadn't planned the rest of it in any detail until the earthquake happened. Certainly, her mind worked quickly. I'm dutifully impressed. Anyway, there was an earthquake, and Shinya called the studio. But Akane answered, not Kanami. Akane had already killed Kanami. Shinya told us that Kanami had said something about paint spilling, but that was a lie. He deliberately phrased things ambiguously so we wouldn't suspect him when we uncovered the trick. It certainly fooled me."

Shinya laughed. "Pure coincidence, I assure you."

"Oh? Seems statistically unlikely, but I'll take your word for it. Anyway, Akane killed Kanami. Then she created the locked room. By deliberately spilling paint on the floor."

"So we were absolutely right to suspect Sonoyama at the time."

"Yes, Ilia. We had reasons to suspect her, and they were entirely justified. But that's all we had. Since Akane made the locked room, we couldn't prove anything. That was why she made it. She made it so she was suspicious, but not too suspicious; a suspect, but not one we could prove was guilty of anything. The plan was to get herself locked up in the store room."

I'd proposed we lock her up. But if I'd said nothing, Shinya could easily have suggested the same thing. There were only a few rooms that could be locked, so it was easy enough to

figure out a plan for each possible location. They'd had plenty of time to scout the place. This was all pure speculation, of course, and unless Shinya and Akane decided to explain it themselves, it would never be any more than that.

Thinking back, I was increasingly convinced that Akane's big blow out with Kanami had all been part of her plan. She had deliberately put herself in danger.

All part of her plan.

She'd been the only one without an alibi (not counting Rei) and I couldn't be sure if that was luck, or planned. Probably just a coincidence.

I think.

"And then she switched places with Ibuki's body?" Ilia asked. "She showed herself to Hikari, and then put the clothes she'd been wearing on Ibuki, and escaped...and has been hiding somewhere in the mansion ever since. She was lurking near the dining room earlier, and heard Sashirono's melt down. Heard her say she was going to be alone in her room. So she went ahead to wait in Sashirono's room...which wasn't locked, or anything. But instead...hmm. So Sashirono's tantrum, and Hikari's attempts to calm her down, were all part of a trap you laid?"

"Yes," I admitted. "We might have found her if we conducted a thorough search of the building, but it's just a bit too big. It would have been a pain. So we set a trap. It didn't go so well, but..."

"The fact that you can describe *that* as 'not going so well' is pretty amazing."

For a moment I couldn't figure out who'd say that, but apparently it was Maki. She'd never said anything nice about me without a trace of sarcasm before. I was more than a little pleased.

"But, wait," Ilia said, putting her hand on her temple. "Something doesn't make sense," she said. "I'm not sure what, but

it doesn't feel right."

"How did Akane get out of the store room?"

"That's it!" Ilia said, clapping her hands together. "Exactly. You haven't explained that. Did Shinya pull her out? When he was dropping the body down?"

"No, Shinya only left the mansion when he was burying Kanami. He dug her up immediately and shoved her in the store room window. He didn't pull anyone out then – Hikari saw Akane late that night, after all. And Shinya has an alibi that evening. There was no way Shinya could have helped her escape. That much is certain."

"Then did he leave a rope ladder or something?"

"No. There would have been marks on the sill. Maybe with a very, very long rope it would have been possible, but at two, Hikari saw the window closed. There's no way for Akane to attach a rope to something outside from inside the store room. She would have needed an accomplice, but her accomplice was busy making an alibi with Maki."

"Then it seems impossible," Ilia said, sulking. "My head's spinning. This is a...a compendium."

"I think you mean conundrum."

"You're full of corrections, but short on explanations," she said, frowning. "Come on. You have a theory, don't you?"

I nodded. "She was locked in the room. The door could only be opened from the outside. The window was very high up. She needed to open that window, and get out of it. If you were trying, what would you do?"

"I would never be in such a situation."

How blue blooded.

"Then Akari, how about you?"

I'd already explained it to Hikari and Yayoi, so I turned to Akari here. I could have gone with Teruko or Rei or Maki, but

Akari was more my type, and I wanted to do something about the awkwardness between us.

"I would...well...reach out my arm and jump, I suppose."

"Yes. But even jumping, you couldn't reach."

"I should imagine myself in that store room, then? If I were locked in there, and couldn't jump high enough...I'd have to try standing on the chair. And then stretching out my arm and jumping."

"You still couldn't reach it."

"Then the answer is simple," she said, forcing a smile. "I'd give up."

"How would the story continue?"

"It would end."

Hmm. Curt. Maybe things weren't awkward after all. This was more like she just hated me. Oh well. I changed the channel.

"Akari suggested using the chair. Most of us would think the same. Even a monkey would use a chair to reach a banana placed out of reach."

"Don't call me a monkey," Akari yelled, bright red. "What is your problem!? You are the rudest person alive! Are you *trying* to piss me off?"

Whoops.

Apparently I had changed to the wrong channel.

"I didn't mean it like that. But I don't see why you're so angry. Monkeys are cute."

"I have never been so insulted in all my life," Akari said, turning her back. "Never speak to me again."

She really did hate me. This hurt. Curse you, Kunagisa! She'll be mine? I don't see how she could be any *less* mine.

"Yikes. Um. Anyway, stand on the chair. Anybody would. Can't reach. Jump, reach out, still can't reach. What now? Simple. Stand on a taller chair."

"There was only one chair in the room."

"A metaphorical chair. Anything chair-like. What else was there in the store room?"

"Nothing. Books? Maybe a futon? The lamp...?"

"There was one more thing. We all saw it. We barely looked at anything else."

There was a silence. Maybe they couldn't guess my meaning, or maybe they all had. Either way, the response was the same.

At last, Ilia voiced the answer.

"Ibuki's body, you mean."

"Yes," I said. What else was there to say? "Kanami had been dead for twenty four hours. More or less. But starting around two, give or take an hour or two, you'd hit a full day since her death. By that time, the body would still be very stiff. That makes it hard to dress, but on the other hand, there are uses for a rigid corpse. Things balanced out."

"Hard to dress...she was wearing a suit. How would you get that on a body in rigor mortis? Even if the joints were still bendable..."

"Maybe they had two of the same outfit, and dressed her up earlier in the day, before full rigor mortis set in. And the old clothes...she could hide those behind the door," I continued. Not bothering to pause. "I thought of this while trying to figure out why they cut her head off. Of course, that was mostly so they could disguise her body as Akane's. The face would have prevented that. But I think there was one other reason. I doubt anyone else has ever cut someone's head off for something like this. Namely...to create a level area above the shoulders."

"You mean...if it wasn't flat, she couldn't stand on it? She needed a level surface...to jump from?" Akari said, hesitantly, as if she was hoping I would reject the idea. "Is that what you're

trying to say?"

"Yes," I said. "The body essentially served as a step. She put the chair near the window, and propped Kanami's body up next to it. Leaning slightly against the wall. Then jumped from the chair to Kanami's shoulders, and then jumped as high as she could. From there, she could just barely reach the window."

Since Kanami has always been in her wheelchair, it was hard to gauge her exact height. But give that they'd recycled her body successfully, she must have been about as tall as Akane. Akane was not a tiny girl. Kanami could have been a head shorter and still been at least a meter and a half. Combined with Akane's own height, that was three meters before any jumping went on. That was enough to reach the window, and then scramble up. Kanami's body would fall over when she jumped, but that was ideal. It made it harder to tell she'd been used as a stair.

This was why the head had been severed flat with the shoulders.

"That doesn't sound very easy..."

"It probably took a few tries. But she had plenty of time. She got it eventually. Kanami's body fell over. She probably wanted to close the window behind her, but since that could only be done from the inside, she had to give up on that idea. The next day, we found Akane's body – which was actually Kanami's body – by which time rigor mortis had begun to fade. Not being experts, that was enough to make it seem freshly dead."

"Ugh," Akari said, turning pale. As pale as she'd been that morning, when she was yelling at me. She seemed angry, but tinged with despair. "That's too horrible. Too horrible. This is unforgivable. Killing someone, cutting off their head, burying them, digging them back up, and disguising them as someone else...all that is horrible enough, but then using them as a chair, or a stair, or a stepping stone? How can something like this..."

"It is difficult to sit on a living human. It is nigh impossible to sit on them for half an hour. But it is not difficult to sit on a corpse," Shinya said, as if quoting. "Kenzaburo Oe said that. Ever heard that quote before, Akari?"

Still very pale, she shook her head. Like a frightened animal. Scared to the point of denying reality.

I could only sigh.

A body was just an empty shell. There was no mind, no personality, no soul left there, no dignity or will. It had become a mere thing. The owner would not complain no matter what you did with it, and even if they wanted to, they were no longer in a place where that luxury was afforded to them.

A body with no head.

Disguised as your own corpse.

A headless body.

Used as a stepping stone.

So what?

Death was the end. They would not start living again. That was all there was to it. Everyone reacted differently, and that was certainly their right, but they had no right to attack others for reactions that differed from their own.

I sighed again.

"That's all, Ilia. I can't be bothered explaining any other details, so work them out yourself. Anything else is largely unimportant. And I'm just not nice enough to bother explaining unimportant things. Figure it out yourself."

"Details..." she said. "But...the motive? That's not exactly what I call a detail."

"But it is something you'll have to ask them."

I'd said the same thing several times already. I glanced at Shinya, and he sighed, and opened his mouth...

"No need, Shinya," said someone behind him.

We turned.

Akane was standing in the door.

She'd been resting in her room.

How long had she been standing there?

How much of my nonsense had she heard?

She had a crutch under one arm, and a confident smirk on her face, like she felt nothing but contempt for the rest of us.

"Akane..."

Sonoyama Akane. One of the ER3 System's Seven Fools.

She'd said she had no complaints if she was killed, no matter when, where or why it happened. But all that had really meant was that she would allow herself to kill, no matter when, no matter where, and no matter why.

She laughed.

"My motive, hunh? Don't be absurd. What use is a motive? I can't comprehend giving a damn about an insignificant, mundane little detail like that. Like there's anything to it beyond a slight difference of opinion."

She cackled.

"I just wanted to eat your brains."

Akagami Ilia
Owner of Wet Wing Raven Island

Week's End – Splitting Up

Handa Rei
Head Maid of the Mansion

Where am I?

Who are you?

In the end.

Kunagisa and I were allowed to leave as planned, at the end of the week. Kunagisa had always hated to change plans once they'd been decided (though this was not nearly as strong a compulsion as climbing stairs alone) so this came as a relief.

But come to think of it, Kunagisa had only come to this island because she was curious about something that had happened here. Was she really ready to leave?

"Oh, that investigation's all done."

Hunh.

I hadn't seen her doing any investigating, but she did not appear inclined to elaborate. I was free to wonder, but it seemed it was not an issue. Time for us to go.

I was sitting on the couch on the same cruiser that had brought us here. Kunagisa was asleep on another couch opposite me.

I had hoped Hikari or Akari would say something as we left, but they both gave very professional good-byes. Thank you. Come again sometime. Take care. I need hardly describe Teruko's response; she said not a word, as if she had vowed to never speak again.

Oh, well.

Story of my life.

Sonoyama Akane and Sakaki Shinya.

The two criminals behind the entire mystery were, obviously, no longer welcome on the island. They were in the next room, behaving themselves. I had no idea what they might be talking about.

When we reached the mainland, they would be released. The opposite of being exiled to an island, but come to think of it, Japan was also an island.

Yayoi and Maki remained on the island.

Yayoi no longer suspected Ilia and Rei of any maleficence. I had no idea if this really settled anything, but it was Yayoi's right to decide her own course in life, and I had no intention of arguing the point.

As for Maki...

She remained an enigma.

"So how much did you know?" I asked, before we left.

She grinned at me. "That would be telling. Maybe I didn't know anything. Maybe I was just acting the part."

"I can't help but think you knew exactly what Shinya and Akane were planning, and helped him create alibis anyway."

"So?" Maki said, placidly. "So what if I did?"

"Then you're an accomplice."

"But Shinya never said a word to me. And I never said a thing to him."

"Still aiding and abetting a murder. Two days in a row, you invited Shinya drinking with you, allowing him to establish a firm alibi. That made it hard for me to work out what he was doing. But what's the truth? If you really did help Shinya..."

"If I did?"

"Never mind. It doesn't matter now." I shrugged. "It doesn't matter, either way."

Maki broke up laughing.

I certainly had something I wanted to say, but there was no point. If she really had the powers she claimed to have, I didn't need to bother saying it, and if she didn't, there was no reason for me to be saying it. Either way, I said nothing.

But I still had questions. Akane and Shinya's scheme

seemed meticulously planned, but it also relied heavily on coincidence. When I was explaining my deductions to Ilia, I'd had to work very hard to disguise this. Their plan was hardly sloppy. Quite the opposite; they had prepared carefully, while leaving room for improvisation. Or at least, luck had very much been on their side. Like they had expected it to be, and allied with it. Like everything from the layout of the island to the furnishings had played to their advantage.

"...nonsense."

It was coincidence of course, just another example of the law of large numbers; simply put, they'd made a bet, and the bet had paid off. That was all. It just looked like more because selective thinking kicked in when you had only the results in hand.

"Occam's razor."

But.

There was one person who knew everything, knew the truth, and knew the future.

Was that also coincidence?

To hell with it.

It probably was. I could see no way to draw any other conclusion. Even if it wasn't, it was all finished now, I had no way of proving things, and even if I did, as long as they kept quiet it meant nothing, and even if it meant something it had nothing to do with me, and even if it had something to do with me I was not interested.

I was done.

Instead, I asked a different question. "Maki, did you tell Teruko I was in danger?"

They had no way of knowing that Akane would nearly kill me in Yayoi's room. Teruko's dramatic entrance, like a movie heroine, was a bit too perfectly timed.

Unless there was someone around who knew the future.

"You think I'd do that?"

"Not really."

"Then I must not have."

Maki smirked at me again. I decided there was no point in pursuing the matter further. I didn't thank her, either. There was no reason to.

"What will happen now? To this island, and Ilia?"

"Dunno," Maki said.

I hung my head.

"Then will you do a reading on Kunagisa and me? You already started, with the compatibility thing. Will we always be like this?"

"I'm expensive."

"Then I'll have to decline."

"For the time being, you'll be as you are," she said. She never told anyone anything unless they told her they no longer wanted to know. Maybe she was just born contrary.

"For the time being?"

"Yep."

"How long is that?"

"Another two years."

I frowned. "What happens after that? Nothing?"

"Dunno," Maki said, chuckling. "I can't see anything more than two years away."

First I'd heard of it.

I must have looked surprised.

"This is a secret," Maki said. "But it's why I don't know what happens to the two of you after that point in time."

"Is that a limitation on your power?"

"It means I'm going to die." Maki said. "Time is relative to me. As far as I'm concerned, all time stops then. Two years, three

months and twenty one days from now, at 3:23 in the afternoon. The time of my death."

I had no words.

"I've lived a horrible life, and I'll die a horrible death, brains scattered everywhere, guts spilling out."

"You can't stop it?"

Maki returned a thin smile. "When the time comes, find out who killed me. Solve the case, like you did today."

"If you can't see anything past that point, you'll never know if I did or not."

She nodded, and held out her hand. Like she was proud that there was a future she didn't know.

"Let's shake on it."

"Okay. Might as well pretend we liked each other, here at the very, very, very end."

But I did not shake her hand.

In the end...

I would never know just why she'd come after me like that. But that was fine. That was the way things should be.

But...

Even then...

Questions remained.

"Excuse me." The cabin door opened, and Rei stepped into the room. "We're almost there. Please get ready to disembark."

"Okay," I said.

Got to wake Kunagisa up. She looked so happy that I hated to, but I couldn't just carry her. Actually, that might be fun.

"Um...I wanted to thank you," Rei said. "You, in particular. I'm grateful to Kunagisa as well, but the way you...well..."

"So you enjoyed yourself, Akagami Ilia?" I asked.

Rei did not seem very surprised. "Yes," she said. "Very

much. I had a very good time."

Akagami Ilia gave me a very happy smile.

A smile she had never shown when playing Rei. This was a human smile, not mere acting.

"How did you know? How long did you know that Rei and I had switched places?"

"I just thought of it a moment ago. On the spot. Even odds I was wrong, which would have been slightly awkward, but not fatally." I looked at Ilia. "If you'd left the room immediately, I would never have noticed, or at least, never have mentioned it."

"I see," she said, nodding gravely. "My end game is always sloppy. My grandfather used to scold me for it. But what prompted the realization? Tell me that, at least."

"Why do you ask?"

"It will help with next time."

She planned to continue this charade.

"Of course I do. Yayoi still hasn't noticed. Himena...well, I can't say."

She grinned at me. The real Akagami Ilia was a lot less haughty than Handa Rei's version. The fake was forced to be more real than the real one.

Ilia seemed pleasantly free of such pressures.

"Well...you didn't say much, did you? You were a little too quiet, really. Maybe you avoided speaking to avoid mistakes, but being too quiet just gets you noticed. You had Teruko keep quiet too, to try and make your silence seem natural, to make your own silence harder to notice, but..."

"Oh, she's always like that," Ilia said. "Even if she didn't wear glasses, I can always tell which one is Teruko. She never speaks."

She was always like that?

Come to think of it, it was hard to believe she'd been

acting.

"Okay, then forget I said that. Anyway, if Ilia was a fake, you could only have traded places with one person. Akari, Hikari and Teruko are triplets, after all. Because they were triplets, you could not become one of them – a unique twist, there."

"Yes," Ilia said, smiling again.

Like she was addressing an equal.

At least, it felt like that to me.

"And, well...just a feeling, I suppose. Teruko didn't do much work. After all, her real job was as your bodyguard. But I'd also not really seen Rei doing much work. I wondered why."

"I made tea!"

"It was very good," I said. I'd forgotten to thank her then.

"And well...the first time I visited your room, you were on the sofa, and 'Ilia' was standing up. That seemed backwards, to me."

"Mm-hmm," Ilia said, happily. I'm sure Rei had done her best to act like the real Ilia, but the real one just seemed more...convincing. "Please go on."

"Um, well..."

Akari and Hikari must have known the truth. They were both good actors too. Especially Hikari. She lied the whole time, but did so with such forlorn grace.

Very impressive work.

"But the deciding factor was that fake Ilia defended you. 'Ilia' and Yayoi talked all night...I imagine Rei was asking her about cooking. A normal topic of interest for a maid."

"Yes. Yayoi believed that was me, so she rarely talked to me at all. An unexpected drawback," Ilia said. "Still...Rei, honestly. Her performance was all over the place. I would never change clothes in front of people. And I am not that mean."

I took her word for it.

The last part seemed a bit dubious.

"By the way, what *were* you doing that night?"

"That's a secret."

"A secret?"

"A lady's evenings are always secret," Ilia said, as if hinting at something.

I didn't have the heart to delve further. I'd seen enough trouble lately. I don't habitually make waves.

"Anyway, she didn't defend Hikari at all – in fact, she accused her being the killer. But where Rei had no alibi, she lied, and made one for her. Why? Because Rei was closer to her than Hikari? Maybe. But I wasn't satisfied with that answer. People living together on an island, cut off from the outside world...seemed like you'd pretty much have to be close. I don't believe human are that stone-hearted."

"Very true," Ilia said. "They are all like my family. They came with me even when I was exiled here."

Exiled.

The reason for her exile...

"But 'Ilia' did defend Rei, and did not defend Hikari. Why not? What if Rei was more important than Ilia herself, someone she had sworn loyalty to?" I tapped my hands together. "Seemed like a decent possibility, anyway."

"Very well done. I could almost hug you."

"I don't mind."

"I can resist," Ilia said, smiling happily.

"May I ask why you switched places with Rei, and pretended to be a maid? Or is it the obvious – you might be exiled, but you're still heir to the Akagami family, and can't show yourself to guests without some precautions?"

There was no guarantee the assembled geniuses would all be good people. No matter how carefully you checked them out ahead of time, the truth was always uncertain. As events had

proven.

So she'd switched places – created a kagemusha.

Seemed sensible enough.

But Ilia just shook her head. "No," she said. "I just wondered who would be the first to notice. Almost a prank, really. No other reason for it."

A prank.

That was a bit disappointing, somehow, but it was also probably true. It just happened that none of these so-called geniuses had ever called her on it.

Years of guests.

And none of them had noticed.

So much for genius.

Maybe Ilia thought the same.

And she might go on thinking that.

"But you noticed."

"If you hadn't overstepped yourself, I wouldn't have. Or if I had, I would not have said anything. You should have stayed quietly at home, not joined us on the boat."

"I have to apologize to Aikawa. We begged for help, but now we don't need it. Not a good idea, really. Aikawa is scary when angry. And always angry. And I'm glad I talked to you. After all, you did make things very entertaining."

"It was my pleasure."

"Tell me," Ilia said, smiling sweetly. "Are you sure you won't come back to the mansion? Kunagisa, Maki, Yayoi, and you. All four of you could become part of my little family. I know you like Akari and Hikari, so you can do with them as you will."

"...that doesn't sound like something you say about your family."

"True," Ilia said, and stuck out her tongue. "But I mean it. I mean everything I say. What do you say?"

I was astonished. She was so extravagant, so heedless, so magnanimous. Once again, this was...

"I can't stand murderers."

Ilia chuckled.

I didn't know why.

"No matter what the reason?"

"No matter what the reason."

Ilia nodded. "I don't know what Hikari or Teruko told you, but...I'm sure you don't think that everything they said was true. All three of them are liars. The fact that they never told you I'd switched places is proof of that."

"Maybe so."

"I didn't call the police for the simple reason that doing so would be no fun at all. Power is so tiresome."

Ilia rolled up her left sleeve. Her skin was beautiful. No scars at all.

"Good bye, then," Ilia said, smiling. She left the room.

".....hunh...?"

Oh, boy.

I had not seen that coming.

What was real? What was a lie?

Who told the truth? Who had lied?

I'd never intended to understand everything, not in this uncertain world.

But even so...

Honestly.

"I'm a clown."

I leaned forward to wake Kunagisa, but she rolled over, cat-like, and looked so blissful that I couldn't. I'd have time enough to wake her when we landed. The longer she could dream, the better.

Still.

Family.

"Should I really have turned that down?"

There was no one here to hear me, and no one to answer. But the answer was as plain as day. There was only one person I could ever call family. As I always did, I muttered, "Nonsense!"

Days Later – The Red Red Fairy Tale

Aikawa Jun - Humanity's Strongest Contractor

Epilogue.

A week after we returned to the island, I had finally started college. Since I'd completely missed the start of term it didn't really take. Unable to work up the enthusiasm to actually attend lectures, I was walking down Nishi-oji. Cutting class. Ditching school.

"Why did I even come back here...?" I muttered, genuinely uncertain. But part of me saw little point in wondering. It wasn't like I was any different, whether I was in the ER3 Program, in Kyoto, or on Wet Wing Raven Island. In the five years I'd been away, I'd no more changed than Kunagisa.

"Or is that more nonsense?"

I was heading south, towards Nakadachiuri and my apartment. I was wondering what to read when I got back when I remembered that a magazine Kunagisa liked came out today, so I swung by a bookshop to pick it up for her.

"Kunagisa Tomo..."

Kunagisa had not left her apartment since we returned. She was busy rebuilding the computers Akane has smashed. She swore she would find a way to make them out of indestructible steel plate. This did not seem logistically feasible, but as long as she was determined, I had no intention of discouraging her.

She'd also checked up on Sonoyama Akane and Sakaki Shinya. Probably with the help of her old friend, Chee-kun.

Akane had quit the Seven Fools, and was leading a more secluded life...while retaining her reputation as an academic. Shinya had stayed with her. Since we did not turn them over to the police, that was all there was to it.

In the bookstore, I browsed for a while, bought Kunagisa's magazine, and left the store. There was an incredibly gaudy, expensive-looking convertible parked outside. Not the kind of car

you saw in Kyoto, really. It was eccentric, to say the least. Possibly even acrobatic.

I'd seen the car in magazine ads. It was an Anaconda, or a Cobra, or a Boa Constrictor, or something like that. Well, almost certainly not a Boa Constrictor, but it was definitely named after some kind of snake. But why would anyone Japanese drive a car like this? For that matter, what kind of person would even consider driving a machine this insane? Out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone getting out – a woman dressed every bit as flashy as her car.

She was wearing a wine red suit that drew the eye despite the best attempts not to look. The top few buttons of her shirt were left undone. She had a spring coat slung over her shoulders. Shoulder length hair that was so absurdly glossy she looked like something out of a conditioner commercial. Crimson sunglasses that hid her eyes completely. Very tall, built like a model. She was certainly a beautiful woman, but the unapproachable kind. Not exactly the type that could be popular with the masses.

Anti-sweet. Reverse gentle.

"Hunh..."

I was impressed despite myself. I suppose it was only right that bad ass cars should be driven by bad ass people. While I stood gaping like an idiot, she stalked right up to me. I stepped aside, assuming she was going to the bookstore, but I could not have been more wrong.

She stopped directly in front of me. Behind her sunglasses, her eyes met mine. Overwhelmed by her violently overpowering aura, I couldn't move. I was like a frog transfixed by the gaze of a snake. I never even tried to dodge.

With no warning whatsoever, she lifted her long leg upwards, sending the toe of her high heel into my gut. I collapsed on the floor.

"Ungh..."

I was this close to throwing up. But she didn't give me time to scream. She instantly began stomping on my back, relentlessly, ruthlessly smashing her heel into my skin. It hurt like hell.

By some unfortunate fluke, there was no one else around. There was a bus stop right outside, but nobody waiting there. Such rotten luck. Not that I wanted to scream and hope people came to help me. I tried to roll away, but she just grabbed a fistful of my shirt.

And yanked me upright.

"Hunh. You really don't close your eyes," she said. She sounded impressed. "Pretty damn cool. Bad ass, even. Well. Okay. Hello."

"Hello?"

"Did I tell you to say hello?" she snarled, lifting me off my feet. She hoisted me one-handed into the passenger seat of her car, like I was her luggage. She then bounded into the driver's seat, took off her sunglasses, and stomped on the gas. Apparently, she hadn't bothered turning the car off. Clearly, the environment was her enemy.

Rubbing my new bruises, I tried to think.

Um. Hunh? What was going on? Was I being kidnapped? Why would anyone do that? This was too much for me to process. I might have spent nineteen years adapting to whatever circumstances I found myself in, but people usually didn't expect me to do so this fast. Who was this woman?

"Who are you?"

"Mm?" she grunted, turning towards me. "My name? Did you just ask my name?"

She was actually more terrifying without the sunglasses. Eyes like daggers. Daggers busy cutting out your kidneys. What

kind of life led to someone acquiring eyes like these?

"My name's Aikawa Jun."

Aikawa?

Aikawa, Aikawa...

Sounded familiar.

"Aikawa?"

"Call me Jun."

She had a strangely rude, curt way of speaking. Seemed a shame, given her beauty. But it also seemed to suit her, somehow.

"Um, Jun. Have we ever met before? I'm not very good at remembering people, so I can never tell."

"First time."

"...thought so," I found it hard to believe I'd have forgotten someone like her.

"What, didn't Ilia tell you anything?"

"Ilia?" That name sounded familiar, too. "Hmm. Ilia...Ilia..."

Oh.

The circuits in my head finally connected.

Now I remembered.

"So you're Aikawa – the detective?"

"Contractor," she said, grinning. "Looks like you remember me now."

"I didn't think you were a woman."

"Thanks. Highest compliment."

She slapped me on the shoulder. I'd just assumed Aikawa was a man, so to find out she was a woman, and a very beautiful one, was quite a shock. Come to think of it, Ilia had only invited women to her island – the only men were plus ones like Shinya and myself. And all fairly young women. Perhaps I should have guessed that Aikawa was a woman, too.

But Ilia had gone and called her a hero.

"I was on my way to your college," Aikawa said, smirking. "Then I spotted you reading. Stroke of luck, I thought. Stopped to chat."

"You were looking for me?"

"Yeah. Wanted to see the face of the man who had the nerve to steal a job from me. I blew my entrance because of you! I never even had an entrance! You'd better make it up to me."

She fixed me with a glare. It felt like her hand was clasped around my heart. To me, the events on that island were over and done with. I had never expected it to come back to haunt me.

"I lost a job because of you! Sure, it was a pissant little job. Just using my brain a minute, no risk to life or limb."

"Hunh, um..." I had no idea what to do, so I figured I might as well apologize. "I'm sorry, I guess. My bad."

Aikawa cackled. "Don't apologize! Gave me a vacation. I oughta be thanking you."

Quite a reversal. I was starting to calm down a little, but the calmer I got the more worried I became. What the hell was going on? I couldn't figure out where I stood with her at all. Aikawa Jun was a consultant, right? What did she want with me?

"Um, where are we going?"

"Heaven. No, maybe hell. I forget."

"Those are pretty different."

"Totally. Couldn't be more different! Wonder which it'll be."

She didn't seem to care.

She was driving very fast indeed. Where was she taking me? Hell seemed likely enough. Perhaps this was where my life ended. Endings always did come abruptly.

"So I've had a look at you. One order of business taken care of! One to go."

With no shame at all, she leaned in close, her face right

next to mine. I went stiff as a board. I was really not used to contact with anyone but Kunagisa.

"Er...one to go? What?"

"Well. I thought I'd clear up what's troubling you," Aikawa said. "I'm a consultant. It's my job to take care of people's problems. When you got a problem you can't even begin to handle, I offer a helping hand."

"...that's what a consultant is?" And being a detective was just one kind of job she consulted for. "But...what's troubling me?"

"I work for free sometimes. Whenever the whim strikes me. A reward for solving the case for me, if you will."

"A reward...?"

"No need to look so nervous. I'm nicer than I look."

Nice people didn't stomp on strangers with their high heels.

"So, Mr. Troubled. Take my hand," she said, thrusting hers out before me. "The decision is yours."

She was weird. Incredibly weird. Indescribably weird. So incomparably weird she made the assembled eccentrics of Wet Wing Raven Island look average. But I took her hand with less hesitation than I'd ever shown before.

Meeting someone this bizarre...

...was a once in a lifetime chance.

"Okay."

A diabolical smile spread across her face.

Maybe I'd made the wrong choice.

"Um. Before we get started...what is it that troubles me?"

"You know that already! Go on. Guess. I came to see you, right. Me. Gotta be something to do with Wet Wing Raven Island."

"...about the murders?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "I stopped by the island. Been planning to take a vacation there, figured I might as well. Figured it was just as well someone solved the case for me. I mean it! Anyway, I heard how things went down. Ilia, Hikari, Akari, and Rei all filled me in. Teruko didn't say a damn thing. Girl is quiet. Never once heard her say a word. There was a half-way decent cook there, too. And a creepy fortune teller, but...ugh, forget her! What is her problem?"

Aikawa was suddenly furious. She nearly ripped the steering wheel off. Apparently she had not had a pleasant experience with Maki. What on earth had Maki said? I could certainly see how the two of them might not get along.

Aikawa fumed for another minute, then went on. "Anyway, they told me about the case. Everything."

"Were you not satisfied, Aikawa?"

"Jun," she growled. "Never use my last name. Only my enemies do."

"Were you not satisfied, Jun?" I asked again, incorporating her correction.

She smiled, pleased. Her moods certainly did shift like rolling dice. One die was not enough to describe it. She was six at once.

"Course I am! I am satisfied as satisfied can be. But are you? Are you completely satisfied? You solved the case. You solved it well. You solved it beyond argument. But it bugs you, doesn't it? Your solution doesn't feel quite right?"

I had no response. Aikawa didn't care.

"I know it doesn't! Busting up a case like in three days? You got too good a brain to overlook it! Am I right?"

I had absolutely nothing to say. Not because what she said was wrong. But because she was absolutely right.

She was right.

Kunagisa and I had ignored any number of details that didn't fit in order to solve the case as fast as possible. There were things about my own deductions that bothered me, deep down.

Aikawa grinned. "You know what it is? You know what bugs you, what bothers you, what makes you so damn unsatisfied?"

"Well...um..."

"Why did Shinya kill Ibuki? Why did Shinya and Sonoyama work together?" Aikawa's red tongue slipped out from between her lips and wagged a challenge at me. "Am I right?"

"...yeah," I nodded, reluctantly. "But that's their problem. Nothing more. Anything related to their motive, their relationship before or after...is out of my hands."

"He's like you," Aikawa said. "You thought as much, right? Shinya himself said as much, right? You and Sakaki Shinya are a lot alike. To him, Ibuki Kanami was as irreplaceable as the blue haired kid is to you. How could he kill her?"

"...I guess I was wrong about it. If not...well, then it was really Akane that mattered to him."

"You happy with that answer?" Aikawa said, dripping with sarcasm. "Course you aren't! You're miserable with that answer! I can feel it oozing off of you! I know everything you feel."

"Okay, okay. Yeah, I don't like it. But, Aikawa..."

"Jun. Never use my last name."

She glared at me again. Christ, it was scary.

"Jun. Yes, it doesn't feel right to me, but there was no other explanation. When you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

"That's a superstition. You believe that? You also believe her when she said she wanted to eat your brains?"

I bit my lip.

Aikawa seemed to be enjoying my reaction immensely.

"Come on! You can do better than that. You really think there's anyone out there dumb enough to believe you can be a genius by eating a genius' brains, anyone stupid enough to think that can actually make them smarter? Maybe there is. People can believe whatever they like. People have the right to be stupid. I got no problem with that. Free to think anything. Free to be a dumbass. But would someone who thought so little of humans they'd use a body as a stepping stone really think like that?"

No.

No, they wouldn't.

"Then...then what? I'm pretty good at not getting to the point, but you're clearly the master here."

"I'm superior to you in all ways imaginable. I understand things you do not. Don't worry. It's not because you suck."

"But just because you're amazing?"

"I can do anything. How else could I be a consultant?"

She brought new meaning to narcissist.

"So what do you make of it, Jun? You've figured it all out? Then please, tell me."

"If you'd asked me right off the bat, you'd have saved us all some time," she chuckled. "I know your mind picked up on it. Hikari told me. You noticed, didn't you? The painting you modeled for. Why was there a watch?"

I gaped at her.

The watch...?

That...I...I'd completely forgotten.

"You didn't forget, did you?" Aikawa growled. "Don't tell me you forgot something that important."

"Absolutely not. I didn't forget. But...I assumed she made a mistake. Kanami relied on her memory to draw, so if she remembered wrong..."

"Poppycrack. The kind of person who goes around saying

crazy shit like, 'Memory and perception are the same.' is functionally incapable of making a mistake like that. Even if she were, there's got to be a better reason, right?"

"Then...what do you think, Jun?"

"I can't speak for anyone else, but as Humanity's Strongest Contractor, I, Aikawa Jun, solemnly declare that Ibuki Kanami did not paint that painting."

"....."

"Am I right? Only explanation. Reductio ad absurdum. Say Ibuki drew the picture. Then it makes no sense for the watch to be in the picture, right? You weren't wearing the watch when you posed for her. Therefore, the watch must have been painted by somebody else."

"How?"

"How?" Did you see her paint the thing? She never painted in front of people. There are people like that, certainly, but I don't think she was one of them. In fact, I think Ibuki *couldn't paint*."

"She couldn't paint? Kanami was a painter! A famous one! Of course she can paint!"

"Really? Plenty of fake artists using ghost painters to do their work," Aikawa said, breezily. "Five hundred thousand of them. Five hundred thousand! Makes perfect sense that Ibuki was one of them. Perfect sense."

"Then, Ibuki was a fake?"

"Think about it," Aikawa said. "Can you draw?"

"I'm not...much of an artist."

"Hunh. I bet you just thought something dumb like, Ibuki Kanami is an artist to the core."

How could she know what I was thinking? It was like I was talking to Maki, but saying so would obviously piss her off, so I did not.

300 Days Later – The Red Red Fairy Tale

"I'm nothing like that sinister weirdo."

Jesus.

Aikawa gave me a crafty smile. "Don't just sit there," she said. "This is basic mind reading. Just a trick. Anyone can do it with a little practice. Anyway, why, exactly, did you think Ibuki was an artist?"

"Because...well..." I trailed off.

"You never actually saw her draw, right? You only had her word for it. You talked to her, and decided she was an artist based on that and that alone."

"I saw the picture. Of the cherry blossoms."

"You didn't see her draw it, though. For someone who doesn't trust anyone you sure are gullible. You may not trust them but you don't bother doubting anything, either. You just don't bother making up your mind. But you bought into Ibuki's bluff."

Bluff?

That was a bluff? Everything she'd said to me? But...but how could I know?

"How could you know?" Aikawa said, jumping ahead of me again. "Good question. Good question."

"If there's something you want to say, say it."

"Is that any way to ask?"

"Please."

Aikawa smiled happily.

She was more childish than I'd suspected.

"Take the dress. When you went to model for her, you saw the dress Ibuki was wearing, and you said something, right? 'You paint in those clothes?'"

I don't know who told her that (frankly, only Maki seemed likely to have known) but she was right.

"Great painters don't mess their clothes," Aikawa said, quietly. Then, "My ass!" she bellowed. "That's ridiculous! Even if

you didn't spill, the stink would ruin the dress! Before even worrying about whether it was possible nobody ever would! Notice these things, dumbass!"

Aikawa appeared to be genuinely angry with me. I felt genuinely chagrined. I was worried she was about to hit me. I could see what Hikari had meant.

She was violent.

"Anyway. Anyone drawing on a canvas would at least wear an apron. Even if you don't like art, that much ought to be common sense."

"Hunh. But then..."

Then what? Kanami lied to me? It was less like a lie and more like...

...she didn't know much about painting.

But the genius painter, Ibuki Kanami...should have known that. Anyone who ever tried to paint would know that.

Which meant...

"She didn't know squat," Aikawa said. "Ibuki Kanami, the genius who couldn't paint. How would you resolve this contradiction?"

"Okay, um...so like you said, Kanami wasn't a real painter?"

"No, no, no. Think. Notice! This is why Ibuki didn't paint that picture. But Ibuki was an artist. Therefore, by simple logic, the Ibuki you met was a fake. Which is why she couldn't paint."

"A fake? But...a fake...why? Um, sorry, I'm confused." I rubbed my forehead. "Then...you mean...the fake Kanami was murdered, and the real Kanami wasn't?"

"Yes. And the real Sonoyama Akane *was* murdered."

Aikawa punched me in the shoulder.

My thoughts froze.

But a moment later the shock washed over me.

"...what!? Akane was...?"

"Yep. Sonoyama Akane. Explains the first question, right? Why'd Shinya kill Ibuki? Simple! *He didn't*. Why did Shinya work with Sonoyama? Simple! *He didn't*. He worked with Ibuki the whole time! The woman his whole life revolved around!"

"Kanami and Akane had switched place? When? Wait a minute. I was on the island with both of them for three days. I may have a bad memory, but I'd have noticed if they switched."

"Ah, they switched before that. Before they got to the island. No idea how long they were on the island, but definitely after the switch."

"Blonde and blue eyed. Versus black-haired and smart. Both Asian, but..."

"You can dye hair. You can wear color contacts. Imitations aren't that hard to do. Particularly if they've got a shtick that's easy to identify."

"But...the painting?"

"Sonoyama painted it. When you talked to her, you were wearing a watch, right? So Sonoyama must have painted you. And by Sonoyama I mean Ibuki, obviously."

Come to think of it, where had Akane been all afternoon? Drawing the cherry blossoms? And that evening, she painted me?"

"Why would they do that?"

"To convince you that Sonoyama as Ibuki was Ibuki. You'd never suspect that it wasn't actually Ibuki Kanami who painted the thing. Though I gotta say, the watch was an uncharacteristically careless mistake."

"But...but...Ilia invited them. Didn't she notice?"

"Why would she?"

"But...she must have seen a photo or something."

"A photo? Please. Come on. Don't make me laugh. Don't

try and kill me with the laughing. Do people look that much like their photographs? No, you meet them in the flesh and they seem totally different. That's why they never find the people on wanted posters. Photos don't move. Reality does. And human eyes are not that reliable anyway. You compare a photo to the real person, and you believe the person."

This was true. Kanami herself had said the same thing. Aikawa's logic was hounding me, driving me into the corner. Like I was the real killer, and she was on to me.

"So...why would they do that?"

"A prank. For the fun of it. Just like Ilia and Rei. I'm sure she told you that's why they've switched places. Just to see if anyone would notice. Would any of these geniuses work it out? Would the rich girl who invites so many geniuses to her salon be able to tell them apart?"

"....."

"At least, Sonoyama believed that. The real one. Shinya and Ibuki contacted her, and proposed the plan. Sonoyama agreed. Sounded fun. Academics are more up for that sort of thing than you'd expect. Particularly the ER3 System type. You knew that much yourself, right?"

Chee-kun's information.

Ibuki Kanami and Sonoyama Akane had met in Chicago. They'd known each other. It was possibly they'd planned something like this. So the fights Kanami and Akane had were to make sure we never noticed they'd switched places?

"Okay, so...then what?"

"Easy. Ibuki and Sonoyama switched places. Ibuki became Sonoyama. Sonoyama became Ibuki. And one of the two was murdered. Sonoyama remained. The one who had become Sonoyama."

"....."

"You thought she was dead once. Then you found out she was actually the killer. Who would ever think she was actually someone else entirely?"

"Kanami...*became* Akane?"

Akane had quit the Seven Fools, and was leading a more secluded life...while retaining her reputation as an academic. Shinya had stayed with her.

"Since you didn't turn her over to the police..." Aikawa chuckled.

"*That* was her motive. But why?"

"Ha!" Aikawa threw back her head, laughing. "That's a question I didn't think I'd hear from you! I mean, if someone asked you what the point of your life was, what would you say?"

"....."

"Your type never wonders. You've never thought about what you want to be. You've never thought about *who* you want to be. No matter how long I explain, you'll never understand how Ibuki Kanami felt. You're complete the way you are. You could travel the whole damn world and never understand her."

A virtual machine, I realized.

A fake.

Trick the software into letting it run.

"You sound like *you* understand."

"No way. How should I understand how other people think? But I got a brain, I can imagine. Locked rooms are like toys to children, all part of their game. A smokescreen to stop us seeing what they were really up to. You were so busy fussing over locked rooms and headless bodies that you never imagined they'd *already switched places*."

Aikawa was right.

But it was just a bit... too... too...

"I'm really finding this hard to believe."

"Got a point there. It is unbelievably hard to grasp. Harder to handle than the way I talk, harder to get a grip on than your personality. But that's the point. She shed her old skin, 'Ibuki', and was reborn as 'Sonoyama.' With all the advantages being Sonoyama Akane came with."

"But...won't anyone notice?"

"Prolly not. She did her homework. Probably picked her as a target on account of they already looked alike."

"So she killed her to become her. Certainly, you could never pull that off with the original still running around..."

Killing someone was the simplest way to get rid of someone. And an isolated island beyond the reach of the law was an ideal place to kill them.

"But she could have accomplished the same thing by just killing Ibuki. There was no reason to pretend she'd been murdered too."

"Listen to yourself! You can do better than that. If she'd done that, people would have wondered why only Ibuki got murdered. They needed to make it look serial. To hide the real reason for killing, they needed a deranged psycho killer hell bent on killing the lot of you. That crap about eating your brains was a last nod in that direction. But not like they wanted to kill just anyone. So she pretended to be the victim. Clear as day. Right? Couldn't be clearer."

"...would a murderer really be reluctant to kill again?"

"You know, not all murderers enjoy it. Just like not all wolves are lone wolves. To achieve their goal, they just avoided danger as much as possible. The more mysteries they cause, the more clues you have to work with, am I right?"

Shinya said they planned to kill everyone. I had believed him. They killed two, were going to kill Yayoi, and tried to kill me – I had not imagined them capable of mercy.

But...

"But they tried to kill Yayoi."

"But they didn't," Aikawa said. Sticking to her guns. "You just thought they were. You just decided that Sonoyama Akane had recycled a body to hide herself so she could kill more people. So you used Sashirono to set a trap. A trap that wouldn't work if the killer were done killing? Nah, that's just your bias talking."

"....."

"Think. Notice. You were dancing on their hands! Why did Shinya show you the sleeping bag? Why did Ibuki smash the computers when she knew everyone was eating breakfast together?"

"...it was all...?"

It was all part of their plan? No coincidence involved. They had read my actions, played me like a puppet. The assault in Yayoi's room, Kunagisa Tomo's torment, all exactly as they planned? We had all been chess pieces, moving on rails predetermined and predicted. I'd only thought I was turning the tables on them, when in fact, they'd set the tables to turn on their own.

Try as I might, I couldn't find a reason to dismiss it. It seemed crazy, but...

But.

The tiny kernel of uncertainty that I'd been nursing since the case had gone away.

Aikawa's hand reached out on front of my eyes, and her long, thin fingers stroked my lips. I'd certainly never been raped, but this must be what it felt like.

"It just means you fell in love with the painting they drew for you. Watch and all, you loved every piece of the portrait Ibuki Kanami drew. She was an artist...or she'd like to think so. Ha ha. You know, they probably planned this all out for me, a week later.

You made them change up their game. They didn't really care who solved the locked rooms, or who worked out that 'Sonoyama Akane' wasn't dead. As long as someone caught the killer, and brought her back to life, that was all they needed."

To make her someone else.

So she could call herself a pan-discipline academic.

"...right. Okay, she became someone else, made their credentials hers, but there's still the matter of talent. Akane may have quit the Seven Fools, but she's still an academic, still doing the same level of work as she ever did. If they'd really switched places..."

"If?" Aikawa cackled. "You're still talking like that? You need to be more adaptable."

"Jun, if your theory is correct, 'Akane' is really Kanami in disguise. But Kunagisa checked up on her, and her output hasn't changed at all."

"Course it hasn't. She can paint, she can study, she can kill and she can become someone else. She's a genius, after all."

"...a genius."

Why had Ibuki had been invited to the island in the first place? She had a unique ability. She was unlike anyone else. She was better than everyone else. She was the top of her field. That was *why*...

"How did you define genius? 'Great people?' Ilia told me. But that's not it. That's not right at all. A genius is someone who pours themselves into one thing, one direction in life. People can do all sorts of things. But if they don't do all sorts of things, if they concentrate on one thing and one thing only, they can do all kinds of crazy shit. Shit that blows the minds of everyone around them."

Abilities honed to perfection.

Focused.

Specialized.

Don't cover your bases.

Point yourself in one direction...

...and concentrate.

Savant Syndrome.

Insatiable appetite.

Aikawa patted my shoulder.

"You did well. But you're still an amateur. This was baseball, you'd be in little league, pitching, and hitting clean up. You assume you're playing another little league team, but nope, you're facing Dome-kun. Decent analogy. You know Dome-kun? Or are you too young for him?" She put her arm around my shoulders. "You just weren't ready to end the story before the detective showed up. You need a bit more training."

"But, wait...Kanami was in a wheelchair!"

"No reason you can't use a wheelchair with healthy legs," Aikawa chuckled. "Any more questions? Ibuki Kanami herself said legs were merely decorative. They came in handy when she needed to kick you, though."

"That works for Akane. She just had to sit down. But Kanami was born with bad legs. How could she just stand up and walk around?"

"Ibuki Kanami? Who became Sonoyama Akane. Who wanted to become someone else. Wouldn't surprise me in the least if she was someone else *before* she became Ibuki."

How long had Shinya been with her?

A long time, he said.

How long?

He was with Akane now.

For how long?

A virtual machine.

Machine after machine after machine.

With no style to speak of.

All styles rejected.

"That's...just..."

Maki.

Had Himena Maki, the psychic, known this too? And knowing it, watched things unfold, smiling, grinning? Just let it happen?

What was real?

What was a lie?

Who was real?

Who was lying?

"Don't ask."

Aikawa laughed aloud.

She stopped the car by the side of the road.

"Dust to dust. What's done is done. You did well. Very well. Accept this praise. But you can do better. If something bothers you, figure out what. If you're uncertain, make yourself certain. Push at shit till it makes sense. Do not dismiss what you feel as mere sentiment. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Good!" Aikawa stuck out her tongue again. "Then may you be well. The world's a worthwhile place because people like you are in it. I think so, anyway. But you've been slacking off a bit too much. People were meant for greater things. Buckle down."

She waggled at eyebrow at me.

"That's all for today. Scram. Get out, you're in my way."

She'd dragged me into her car, and now she was kicking me out. Not that I planned to stick around if I was no longer welcome. I opened the door, and got out of the car.

I looked around, wondering where I was.

In front of Kunagisa's apartment building.

The single least Kyoto-like place in Kyoto: Shiroasaki, where the rich folk lived. Even Aikawa's ridiculous car looked at home here.

"Oh," I said, looking up at the apartment building. "This is definitely heaven."

"Or hell. You were on your way here anyway, right?"

"How'd you know?"

Aikawa pointed at the bag in my hands. The magazine inside was for Kunagisa, all right. But had that been all she needed to know? She was like someone out of a novel.

A detective novel.

Aikawa laughed. "See you again sometime. Weirdo like you's bound to run into me again."

She slapped me on the head and shoulders, once each, for good measure. Then pointed at the top floor.

"Say 'Hi' to Kunagisa for me."

Question. I had not done the heavy lifting in this case all on my own. Kunagisa had a right to half the glory. Had she come to see me alone? Did she plan to see Kunagisa later?

With that thought in mind, I said, "Come up and meet her. Since you're here already."

"Nah, saw her yesterday."

I was leftovers.

I hung my head.

And sighed.

"Jun," I said. "What do you live for?"

"Do I need to say? Same as you, Ii-tan."

Her foot slammed into the gas, and in the blink of an eye, the red consultant was out of sight. For a moment I stood there, unable to think. Too tired to think.

Wow.

"...feels like I've been mugged."

The metaphor was hardly inappropriate. She swiped all the baggage I'd been lugging around, and had left me feeling empty inside.

Who was she? Why had she started things by beating the crap out of me? Just because of what Teruko had told her? Or just revenge?

For that matter, why had she come to see me? Revenge again? Because I'd stolen her spotlight? Or just for the hell of it, or like she said, a reward.

Maybe it didn't matter. She didn't exactly have a pleasant personality, and even if she did, I could always revise that opinion later.

Really.

Honestly.

How can I put it?

Everything, and everyone.

Really.

"Really...unbelievable nonsense."

Like Akagami Ilia.

Gathering geniuses, mocking them, lying to them, all for her own pleasure, in her own little world. Now and forever.

Like the Chiga triplets.

All three identical and yet completely different, but like the Sierpinski triangle, they were fractal aspects of the whole, their differences making them all the more alike, the infinite depths of which no one would ever know.

Like Himena Maki.

Having decided she only had two years left to live, she knew the truth, knew all truths, and elected to yawn like a cat and go to sleep.

Like Aikawa Jun.

Humanity's strongest consultant, the red detective, solving

the case within an inch of it's life only after everything had been resolved and there was no point in doing so.

Like the woman whose real name no one would ever know.

She...was clearly a genius.

"...and."

And.

And like Kunagisa Tomo.

"....."

None of it mattered to me.

The world went as it would and if it didn't, then it didn't matter to me and if it didn't matter to me then I wasn't interested.

I had never once wanted to be someone, and I had never once thought that I had to do something. I had thought that was fine, and even that thought didn't matter to me.

Some part of me was frozen off.

No, that's not right.

Some part of me was dried out.

Apathetic, disinterested.

Kunagisa Tomo, was...

...my source of moisture.

"Moisture...?"

Was that how it worked for you, Shinya? Following her like a shadow. If so, we were much, much too alike.

"Hmph."

Yuck.

I don't know who the world revolves around, but the earth revolves around the sun. Things were as they were and would not be otherwise. Same went for everyone.

The truth was always out of reach.

But I didn't want it, anyway.

Perhaps that was the problem. The laziness Aikawa had

accused me of.

"Like I care. I don't think about stuff like that all that often, and I don't care if the world goes the way I want it, and I don't care to solve the mysteries in it. If I see a puzzle in front of me I just get annoyed. I'll live until I die and that's enough."

Done talking to myself, I began walking.

Thinking any longer was too much work. People who like thinking could do the thinking for me. Sorry, Aikawa; but I don't care if I make the world worthwhile.

If someone asked me why I was alive, I'd say, 'Just in case.' Not many people live for any better reasons. I certainly didn't. Most people don't.

But.

But Kunagisa was different.

That's all I wanted to say.

"Not that it matters."

I stood outside Kunagisa's apartment and decided to go home. For the simple reason that I wanted to prove the crazy consultant wrong.

I could see her tomorrow.

Any time I wanted.

That was all.

Or should have been.

I stopped.

And thought.

Five years ago.

Before I met Kunagisa Tomo. I thought I had nothing. But reunited with her, spending time with her...I still had nothing.

I was still empty.

Like I was...

...going through a routine.

Going through the motions of a life.

"Ah, damn it."

I could hear the consultant laughing.

I remembered the words of the psychic.

And the words of the triplets.

And...

The warning from whoever-she-was.

"Okay, okay, I'm going."

I hated to, but I had to admit my life was led going where the current took me. Let them manipulate me as they pleased, as they desired, as they liked.

Like a puppet.

A machine without a soul.

Kind of a half-assed one.

Thus.

This vague, arbitrary, mechanically indefinite, averagely devoid, story with an unnaturally hollow certainty ended like a blood red fairy tail.

And I went to Kunagisa's side.

<Alred marchen> is the END!!

Afterword

Imagine there was an unimaginably interesting novel within your reach, a great novel, a seminal work of literature. Of course, you know there is no such thing, but imagine there is. Imagine you have finished reading this novel, and the moment you did you found yourself shouting, "This author is a genius!" Regardless of whether you would ever do such a thing, I personally use the word genius rather a lot. But the expression sounds like a way of excusing one's own mediocrity, like, "He's a genius, much better than I am, of course he can do things I can't." "I'm not demeaning myself, I'm admiring him." The words make sense, but I can't help questioning the attitude behind them. I don't think we should just throw the word around thoughtlessly. And there's no guarantee that talent will be recognized. Most talents go to waste. Only people who produce results get called geniuses, and that is an issue that can't be dismissed by babble about hard work and being in the right place at the right time. It's an issue too thorny for me to ponder, but if you want to do something, you're better off not talking about genius or untapped potential or hard work or luck or what you were meant to do.

So it comes as something of a shock just how many times I used the word genius in this book. Ibuki Kanami, Sashirono Yayoi, Sonoyama Akane, Himena Maki, Kunagisa Tomo and Aikawa Jun. The narrator may consistently describe them as geniuses, but it's more than a little dubious if any of them really qualify. From their perspective, they simply lived their lives and one day woke up to find everyone calling them genius. That may not be fair; they probably have a more complex view of things, but even that boils down to Ibuki Kanami saying, "Genius? You're all just stupid." The Beheading Cycle's assembly of geniuses is nothing but nonsense; it contains no geniuses at all.

Along the road to this getting published I received help from so many people I do not know where to begin the thanking. If there is any part of this book that is good, it is their doing, and that of Japan's book stores. In other words, anything bad should be blamed entirely on me and my damp palms. I would particularly like to thank my editor, Ota Katsushi, for his faith and guidance; the illustrator, Take; and Seiryoin Ryusui for honoring the work with a cover quote.

NISIOISIN